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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on Children Achieving, a systemic reform program implemented in 1995 to improve the Philadelphia public schools. Children Achieving was the first attempt by an urban district to test systemic reform in practice. The first part of the report discusses the beliefs and values of the program's action-design component, which emphasized standards-based instruction and increased parent involvement in the schools. The action design called for a greater role of parents in holding school, district, city, and state officials accountable for the quality of public education. The second part of the report presents two case studies that involved parents from low-income, racial-minority, ethic-minority, or linguistic-minority neighborhoods who were actively engaged in local school change. The first case involves the Alliance Organizing project, a parent organizing initiative. The second case involves Teachers and Parents as Students, an initiative of the Philadelphia Writing project based at the University of Pennsylvania. The concluding section of the report discusses the implications of the case studies for future reform efforts. It asserts that intermediary groups can play powerful roles in supporting parent involvement and that standards-based reform is enhanced through parent participation. But these efforts must be sustainable over the long term. (WFA)

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Clients, Consumers, or Collaborators? Parents and their Roles in School Reform During *Children Achieving*, 1995-2000

Occasional Paper

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August 2001

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ABOUT THE CHILDREN ACHIEVING CHALLENGE

In February 1995 shortly after the School Board of Philadelphia adopted *Children Achieving* as a systemic reform agenda to improve the Philadelphia public schools, the Annenberg Foundation designated Philadelphia as one of a few American cities to receive a five-year $50 million Annenberg Challenge grant to improve public education.

Among the conditions for receiving the grant was a requirement to raise two matching dollars ($100 million over five years) for each one received from the Annenberg Foundation and to create an independent management structure to provide program, fiscal, and evaluation oversight of the grant. In Philadelphia, a business organization, Greater Philadelphia First, assumed this responsibility, and with it, the challenge of building and sustaining civic support for the improvement of public education in the city.

Philadelphia's *Children Achieving* was a sweeping systemic reform initiative. Systemic reform eschews a school-by-school approach to reform and relies on coherent policy, improved coordination of resources and services, content and performance standards, decentralization of decision-making, and accountability mechanisms to transform entire school systems. Led by a dynamic superintendent and central office personnel, *Children Achieving* was the first attempt by an urban district to test systemic reform in practice.

EVALUATION OF CHILDREN ACHIEVING

In 1996 the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) at the University of Pennsylvania and its partner, Research for Action (RFA) were charged by the *Children Achieving* Challenge with the evaluation of *Children Achieving*. Between the 1995-1996 and 2000-2001 school years, CPRE and RFA researchers interviewed hundreds of teachers, principals, parents, students, District officials, and civic leaders; sat in on meetings where the plan was designed, debated, and revised; observed its implementation in classrooms and schools; conducted two system-wide surveys of teachers; and carried out independent analyses of the District's test results and other indicators of system performance. An outline of the research methods used by CPRE and RFA is included in this report. A listing of the reports on *Children Achieving* currently available from CPRE is found below. There will be several additional reports released in the coming months. New reports will be listed and available as they are released on the CPRE web site at www.gse.upenn.edu/cpre/.

CHILDREN ACHIEVING'S THEORY OF ACTION

To assess the progress and effects of a comprehensive reform such as *Children Achieving*, it is essential to understand its "theory of action," that is, the assumptions made about what actions or behaviors will produce the desired effects. A summary of the *Children Achieving* theory of action follows:

Given high academic standards and strong incentives to focus their efforts and resources; more control over school resource allocations, organization, policies, and programs; adequate funding and resources; more hands-on leadership and high-quality support; better coordination of resources and programs; schools restructured to support good teaching and encourage improvement of practice; rich professional development of their own choosing; and increased public understanding and support; the teachers and administrators of the Philadelphia schools will develop, adopt, or adapt instructional technologies and patterns of behavior that will help all children reach the District's high standards.

ADDITIONAL READING ON CHILDREN ACHIEVING

The following publications on the evaluation of the *Children Achieving* are currently available through CPRE at (215) 573-0700.

- Recruiting and Retaining Teachers: Keys to Improving the Philadelphia Public Schools (May 2001)
- School Leadership and Reform: Case Studies of Philadelphia Principals (May 2001)
- Contradictions and Control in Systemic Reform: The Ascendancy of the Central Office in Philadelphia Schools (August 2001)
- Clients, Consumers, or Collaborators? Parents and their Roles in School Reform During *Children Achieving*, 1995-2000 (August 2001)

DISCLAIMER

The research reported herein was conducted by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education and Research for Action. Funding for this work was provided by Greater Philadelphia First and The Pew Charitable Trusts. Opinions expressed in this report are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views of Greater Philadelphia First, The Pew Charitable Trusts, or the institutional partners of CPRE.

CHILDREN ACHIEVING, 1995-2000: THE RHETORIC AND REALITY OF PARENT ROLES IN SCHOOL REFORM

INTRODUCTION

The *Children Achieving* reform plan envisioned parents as critical players in school reform, a vision that freshly emphasized the need to transform relations between local schools and parents and communities. This vision represented a departure from the passive view of parents as clients and consumers to an active view of them as collaborators with education professionals in shaping children's school experience.[1] This report provides an overview of the many roles *Children Achieving* envisioned for parents between 1995-2000, with particular attention to their role as education leaders and collaborators with teachers and principals in school reform. This study asked the following questions:

- What roles were envisioned for parents in *Children Achieving*?
- What structures and processes were created for parent participation in school reform and what did implementation look like?
- What did two parent initiatives that intentionally involved parents as education leaders say about the promises and challenges of creating new roles for parents in school reform?
- What are the implications of making parents partners in educational change in future efforts?

The first part of this report presents the beliefs and values expressed in the *Children Achieving* Action Design about parents and their roles in reform, and examines the implementation of parent involvement. The Action Design included nine reform components and a tenth point that it was necessary to undertake all the components. The design had two major emphases: standards-based instruction and decentralization that included increasing parent engagement in the schools. The Action Design incorporated both top-down high-stakes accountability measures and a participatory model of school reform in which parents were to play a key role in holding schools, and District, city, and state officials accountable for the quality of public education.

Children Achieving instituted several structures intended to engage parents more substantially in school reform. The practice of schools engaging parents was limited, however, with the exception of the local school councils and a few other efforts in some more

[1] W. Ayers, "The standards fraud." In J. Cohen and J. Rogers (Eds.), *Will standards save public education?* (pp. 64-69). Boston: Beacon Press, 2000. E. Cortes, "Organizing communities and constituents for change." In S.L. Kagan and N.E. Cohen (Eds.), *Reinventing early care and education: A vision for a quality system* (pp. 247-266). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.

racially mixed and higher socio-economic neighborhoods.

The second part of this report is an in-depth look at two case studies of parent involvement that were exceptions to the pattern noted above. These cases were included in this report because they involved parents from low-income, racial-, ethnic- or linguistic-minority neighborhoods in roles that substantively engaged them in local school change. Intermediary groups played a key role in both cases. The first case involves the Alliance Organizing Project, a parent organizing initiative begun as part of the *Children Achieving* reform. The second case involves TAPAS (Teachers and Parents and Students), an initiative of the Philadelphia Writing Project based at the University of Pennsylvania. TAPAS brought teachers, parents, and students together as an inquiry community to investigate reform at their local schools. These case studies provide evidence of the resources and energy that urban parents can bring to school reform. The cases also illuminate the tensions and challenges that arise when parents and educators assume new roles. Teachers and principals often talk about the importance of parent involvement and frequently say they want a different kind of relationship with the families of their students, but in practice, teachers and principals may retreat when parents want to participate in decision-making. The case studies show how two different groups worked to get parents and educators working together in new ways.

The concluding section of this report discusses the implications of the case studies for future reform efforts. In particular, we assert that intermediary groups can play powerful roles in supporting parent engagement and that standards-based reform is enhanced through parental participation. Intermediary groups and principals can create opportunities for dialogue among diverse stakeholders and across schools. But these efforts must be sustainable over the long term.

VALUES, BELIEFS, AND IMPLEMENTATION

PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND CHILDREN ACHIEVING: THE VISION

The School District of Philadelphia reform plan, the *Children Achieving* Action Design, called for the abandonment of "old traditions, structures, and rules" regarding parents' roles in order to fashion a system that would respond to the needs of students who had been historically underserved by public education. The reform based the new leadership roles for parents on the belief that "fundamental change [in the education of children] will not occur without a transformation in the relationship between every school and the parents and communities which surround it."[2] The Action Design envisioned parents as "active and involved at every level" in local schools.[3]

[2] School District of Philadelphia, *Children Achieving strategic action design 1995-1999*. Philadelphia: Author, 1995, p. i. VIII-1.

[3] Ibid, p. xi.

DRIVERS OF REFORM

The *Children Achieving* notions of mutual accountability and comprehensive learning support and the response to a 20-year-old desegregation case against the School District of Philadelphia were the drivers behind the new roles for parents.

The *Children Achieving* systemic reform envisioned implementation aligned through all layers of the District, from the central office, to the clusters, schools, small learning communities, and classrooms to the larger community. Theoretically, such an aligned system of public education stakeholders would enhance a sense of mutual accountability for public education among administrators, teachers, and parents. The notion of mutual accountability included the belief that schools could not do it alone; that schools lack all the material, social, psychological, and intellectual resources needed to implement and sustain reform. The success of the *Children Achieving* systemic approach depended on the active participation of parents and communities.[4]

The *Children Achieving* focus on parent involvement was also a necessary response to the more than 20-year-old desegregation case of the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission v. The School District of Philadelphia. In 1994, Federal Appellate Court Judge Doris Smith found there were "racial disparities in educational opportunity and educational achievement in...Philadelphia public schools" and ordered the District to "develop a plan which addresses factors including parent involvement." The court's remedial order stated:

The School District shall immediately develop creative outreach strategies for each school to implement, where necessary, to convince parents of school students of the critical need for direct participation in the education of their children. The School District shall direct these strategies initially toward racially isolated schools where students' parents shall be encouraged to become regular partners with their children's teachers, to meet high standards, and to serve as classroom and school volunteers. These parents may serve as a core for the local school councils...[5]

The court, then and now, views inclusion of parents in school reform as a lever for educational equity and excellence both within the district and at the state policymaking level.

NEW ROLES FOR PARENTS AS EMPOWERED PARTNERS

In order for parents to achieve the status of full partners, the *Children Achieving* Action Design proposed granting parents the authority to set their own agenda. Early in the reform, Superintendent David Hornbeck described the concept of an empowered community, an idea that reflected the Action Design's approach to parents as education leaders:

Over the years, what's just become clear to me is that if we don't have a strong sense of connection between

[4] Ibid, p. VIII-1.

[5] PHRC v. School District of Philadelphia, 667 A.2d 1173, 1188 (Pennsylvania Commonwealth, 1995).

community and school, home and school, that we can't get the work done nearly as well inside the school. And that if we're going to partner with a community, we can't partner with somebody who doesn't bring anything to the table because then it's just a subordinate kind of role. So when I came here, I made the notion of empowered community a part of Children Achieving in general.[6]

Embedded in this conceptualization of an empowered community was the belief that true partnerships require that parents have a voice. The Alliance Organizing Project, the first case study in the second part of this report, was part of the *Children Achieving* plan. Parental participation in school reform would be strengthened by organizing parents to work collectively on their concerns about their children's educational experience, at both the local school and district levels.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The *Children Achieving* Action Design emphasized that the purpose of new roles and relationships was to create "mutual accountability."[7] One goal of the *Children Achieving* reform was "to enable students and parents to hold schools accountable, and to enable teachers, administrators, and schools to hold the system and the wider community accountable."[8] This system of accountability transformed parents from their historic role as outside observers of school reform — clients and consumers — to the more dynamic position as players in the reform process.

The *Children Achieving* Action Design described the need for more complete sharing of information with the public in order to achieve a system of mutual accountability. The District must "provide an honest accounting to our customers, parents, and all other citizens and taxpayers, of how well Philadelphia's children are achieving on a school-by-school basis as well as district-wide."[9] If all stakeholders, including parents, understood and supported the standards that children were meant to achieve, and if all stakeholders shared expectations that children could achieve these standards, then children's learning would be surrounded by a cohesive support system. Creating an informed parent base would provide opportunities to establish shared beliefs and expectations among teachers, administrators, students, and their families about schooling and students' abilities which, in turn, would enhance the possibilities for the achievement of all students.

Participation of parents was integral to the *Children Achieving* vision. The theory of action developed by the independent evaluators of the *Children Achieving* reform initiative and adopted by Superintendent Hornbeck in 1996,

[6] E. Gold, *Community organizing at a neighborhood high school: Promises and dilemmas in building parent-educator partnerships and collaborations.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1999, p. 3.

[7] School District of Philadelphia, *Children Achieving strategic action design 1995-1999*, p. VIII-1.

[8] Ibid, p. I-7.

[9] Ibid, p. VIII-2.

however, indicates that the commitment to parents as full partners was already fading early in the reform. The theory of action stated:

If central administration works with schools and community to set clear and high standards for student achievement, aligns effective assessment with those standards, establishes an accountability system that offers incentives, and monitors equity at multiple layers of the organization, and if central offices and clusters provide guidance and high-quality supports (including professional development) to schools and small learning communities, then school/small learning community staff, in consultation with their local school councils, will seek out and adopt best practices that enable all students to meet high standards.

By the end of the first year of *Children Achieving*, the role of the central office and clusters had become predominant in catalyzing and enabling reform, while the role of the local school councils had become, at best, advisory. With this alteration, the reform vision of parents as collaborators had receded.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND CHILDREN ACHIEVING: THE REALITY

The Philadelphia School District's parent involvement practices fall into four key areas that are described below. These include: creating standards and performance assessments, local school councils, information sharing and relationship building, and community services and support. (The Alliance Organizing Project's work with parents, another initiative of the *Children Achieving* reform, is described in the second part of this report.) This following section draws upon evaluation reports written over the years of the *Children Achieving* reform, District documents, and interviews with parents, teachers, and administrative staff.

CREATING STANDARDS AND PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT

Constructing a set of standards that clearly delineated what students should know and be able to do in different subjects at given grade levels was an early key reform activity intended to "catalyze improvements in [classroom] practice."[10] It was the belief of the District leadership that shared expectations about testing and learning would improve student achievement. The task of writing and reviewing academic standards brought parents and educators together in 1995 to define goals for student achievement, to develop a set of performance tasks to measure student growth, and to write curriculum frameworks to support standards-driven instruction.

Parents who participated on these teams and those who attended the District's public forums on standards had an opportunity to see first-hand what standards-driven reform was trying to accomplish. A number of parents experienced a new level of inclusion and a feeling of authenticity as a result of this effort to create a cross-constituency school community. One parent reflected, "There must be a

[10] Ibid, p. II-2.

marrying of parents and staff...this school belongs to me and my community. It's too important not to be involved."[11] For a number of parents, this connection to the reform effort translated into direct parent involvement in neighborhood schools. They began working more closely with school staff as members of local school councils and Home and School Associations to make the standards work. In some cases, parents assisted teachers in refashioning the school educational program.[12]

Many professionals also talked of being changed by the opportunity to work with parents. For example, one high school assistant principal commented:

I was on the science standards writing team and there were parents on it. And at first when we sat down, we were K-12 educators going to write science standards. And we couldn't figure out, why are the parents here? And they would make comments, and we would look at them like, 'We're the teachers you know and you just sit back there and listen.' But as the process evolved we began to include them because their concerns were real. And I think the pride we have in the copy we have now is the result of their concerns and input.[13]

A teacher described the way that parents, teachers, community members, and university faculty working together interrupted traditional, hierarchical power relations: "I'm more comfortable in this situation, this time...I am debating and talking with college professors. And parents. There are parents in our group that are bringing this tremendous perspective...and administrators for the first time."[14] The names of parents listed in district documents as co-creators of the standards and the Curriculum Frameworks, alongside school and university faculty, represented a major achievement of democratic participation during the early days of *Children Achieving*.

The standards were introduced at the school level at orientation sessions for parents held in each of the 22 clusters.[15] This effort, however, was never continued systematically, school-by-school, in a way that mirrored the original approach of bringing administrators, teachers, and parents together centrally. In fact, many principals and teachers were not ready to implement standards and needed support in order to do so. In these cases, the potential role of parents was overshadowed by the conflict, confusion, and chaos of changing to a standards-driven system. Even in schools ready to implement standards, there was ambivalence about and no vision for the role of parents. Failure to include parents, for whatever reason, undermined a two-part basic belief of the *Children Achieving* reform: that all stakeholders, including parents, must

[11] J. Cohen, *Feedback on standards writing teams.* Memorandum to Philadelphia Education Fund, 1996.

[12] School District of Philadelphia, *High progress schools study.* Philadelphia: Author, 1998.

[13] Gold, *Community organizing at a neighborhood high school*, p. 96.

[14] Cohen, *Feedback on standards writing teams.*

[15] Clusters were geographic units established under the *Children Achieving* reform; each cluster included a neighborhood high school and its feeder middle and elementary schools.

understand and support the standards that children are meant to achieve, and that agreement about how to achieve the standards provides a cohesive support system for children's learning.

LOCAL SCHOOL COUNCILS

The *Children Achieving* reform initiative envisioned urban parents as active participants in reform, thus upsetting the historic place of parents as outsiders. Like other reform initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s, *Children Achieving* created local school councils as a pivotal mechanism for including parents as full partners in reform.

Children Achieving initially gave local school councils broad jurisdiction. Parents, along with the principals and teachers serving on the councils, were granted authority over policy decisions at the school level, including budget allocation, external resources, safety and security measures, transportation, and facilities operation and management. The Action Plan also gave local school councils authority in selecting and evaluating principals.[16] Parents and teachers were to be represented on the councils in equal numbers. The Home and School Associations were responsible for parent participation, while the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers' building committees were responsible for teacher participation in the council elections. Early in the reform, however, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers vigorously opposed full implementation of the local school councils. The struggle with the District over the constitution and jurisdiction of the councils resulted in a joint Federation-District agreement: parents would constitute 49 percent and teachers 51 percent of council membership, and the purview of the councils would be limited to discipline issues, such as suspension and expulsion, and school safety. The agreement compromised the potential of parents to inform teaching, learning, and student achievement[17] and was a turning point in a reform predicated on decentralization with parents collaborating with educators in school reform.

The District's decision to forgo strong, school-based governance by parents and teachers had widespread consequences for the legitimization of local school councils. Although the District provided explicit guidelines for the creation and responsibilities of the local school councils, their implementation was uneven and the scope of their authority, where they did exist, varied considerably. Some local school councils did participate effectively in personnel decisions, such as recommending candidates for the principalship, but the recommendations of other councils were either dismissed or ignored. Among the schools that had operational local school councils, most of the councils engaged in traditional roles of providing information and building communication between parents and the schools. The lack of

[16] School District of Philadelphia, *Children Achieving strategic action design 1995-1999*, III, p. 4.

[17] J. Christman, *Guidance for school improvement in a decentralizing system: How much, what kind, and from where?* Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, Research for Action, and OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, 1998. R.C. Neild, *Report on the 1998 Philadelphia parent survey*. Unpublished manuscript. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1998.

invitation or opportunity to participate in meaningful decision-making, in many cases, resulted in the disappointment and disengagement of parents.[18]

The implementation of local school councils mirrored traditional racial and class divisions between home and school, again reflecting traditional patterns of parent involvement. Court-appointed monitors from the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission found that approximately 90 percent of the District's non-racially-isolated schools had local school councils, while only 58 percent of the racially-isolated schools reported having councils.[19] One hundred percent of the schools in six out of 22 clusters had certified local school councils; only one of these was a racially-isolated cluster.[20] Further, a 1998 survey of District parents found that African American parents were less likely to know about local school councils.[21] The uneven distribution of local school councils raises troubling questions about presumptions regarding who can and should be involved in school decision-making and about how parents perceive the invitation to participate. One former District administrator noted that the School District is now attempting to engage parents whom they had actively shunned in past years.[22]

Spurred by the court monitors, the District's Office of Leadership and Learning began taking stronger steps to support school-based teams of teachers, parents, and administrators in the certification and development of local school councils. These steps included training opportunities for parents, teachers, and administrators, and increased public relations efforts. In some cases, this has lessened tension between school staff and parents, and increased understanding of the roles and responsibilities of council members. A staff member from the Office of Language and Learning remarked: "Many teachers who once saw the school council as a threat to the school's [union] building committee and parents who saw councils as threats to the Home and School Association now see the council as a vehicle for collaborative leadership."[23] The staff member also said, however, that few administrators had participated in the training and that this led some parents to be mistrustful of the principal's willingness to share power.

The *Children Achieving* Action Design sought to institutionalize parents as co-leaders and co-decision-makers through the local school councils. In reality, the authority of the local school councils had been very circumscribed. Often, the attitude of the principal was most influential in determining whether local school councils were inclusive or were functioning at all.[24] Central office

[18] Christman, *Guidance for school improvement in a decentralizing system.*

[19] School District of Philadelphia. Internal memorandum, 1999.

[20] Leadership briefings, 1998.

[21] Neild, *Report on the 1998 Philadelphia parent survey.*

[22] Interview, 2000.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Christman, *Guidance for school improvement in a decentralizing system.* B. Malen and R.T. Ogawa, "Professional-patron influence on site-based governance councils: A confounding case study." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 10 (1988), pp. 251-270.

efforts to strengthen local school councils — through improved communication and training — may have smoothed the operation of some local school councils, but did not expand their domain. Arguably, the district-union agreement regarding the composition and jurisdiction of the local school councils was pivotal to parent roles in the reform. The potential of local school councils to engage and develop parents as education leaders and collaborators with teachers and principals became, at best, a shaky and incomplete bridge to transforming the role of parents in the schools.

INFORMATION SHARING AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

In the *Children Achieving* vision, empowered parent involvement means that parents receive information about their children and their schools, and that parents share their values, knowledge, and concerns about schools and their children. Creating this fund of common knowledge facilitates a system of mutual accountability.

The *Children Achieving* Action Design committed the District to being more forthcoming with information about the reform plan and about the improvement schools were making in student achievement. Publications and advertisements, community forums and institutes, and the formation of alliances with various community-based agencies were means of sharing this information more widely.[25]

Local schools became more forthcoming with information regarding budgets and the use of Title I monies. One central office staff member identified the *Children Achieving* commitment to openness as a significant indicator of the changed cultural climate within the central office — the District became more willing to expose its own weaknesses and promised public measures of accountability.[26]

Under *Children Achieving*, the implementation of small learning communities throughout the system was another potential arena for engaging parents in new leadership roles at the school level. Dividing schools into quasi-autonomous sub-units of teams of teachers and students who stay together over multiple years provided opportunities to strengthen the relationship between teachers and parents. The purpose of instituting small learning communities was to nurture close "multi-year relationships among teachers, parents, and students" leading to an academically rigorous learning environment that would raise levels of student achievement.[27] There had been small learning communities (called Charters) in some high schools prior to *Children Achieving*; many of the Charters had valuable experience they might have shared regarding teacher-parent collaboration. Many small learning communities succeeded in bringing teachers together to make instructional decisions, but they did not increase parental participation in school-based

[25] A. Rhodes and E. Manz, *Bringing school reform to the public: Public engagement initiatives in Philadelphia from 1995-2000.* Philadelphia: Philadelphia Education Fund, 2000.

[26] Interview, 2000.

[27] School District of Philadelphia, *Children Achieving strategic action design 1995-1999*, p. xi.

decision-making about student learning goals, nor did they increase parents' sense of ownership of the school academic program.[28]

Some small learning communities invited parents to take part in discussions about academic quality and school-community values, but, for most parents, the conversations in small learning community meetings largely centered on their underachieving children as part of the District's comprehensive support process.[29] One parent involved in the Teachers and Parents and Students inquiry community (discussed in our second case study in the second part of this report) conducted an informal poll of parents who frequented the Family Center at her elementary school to see what they knew about the school's small learning communities. She discovered that only one of 20 parents polled knew the name of his or her child's small learning community and none of the parents interviewed could describe the purpose of a small learning community.[30] Data from the Philadelphia Educational Longitudinal Study of eighth-grade students' transition to high school revealed that many parents of struggling ninth graders had no knowledge of their children's small learning community theme or curriculum, had limited knowledge of the high school context; and did not have a systematic way to receive valuable information or learn strategies they could use in helping their children succeed in school.[31]

During the years of the *Children Achieving* reform initiative, there was an overall increase in the information that the District shared with the public and the information was more widely disseminated than previously.[32] For the most part, however, neither the implementation of the local school councils nor the small learning communities created the kind of relationships that would have engaged parents as reform partners at the school level. As a result, the information shared with parents reflected a unilateral school-to-parent communication, with parents playing passive roles as recipients of knowledge.

COMMUNITY SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

In recognition that the District did not have the resources or tools to do it all, the *Children Achieving* Action Design outlined a complex, collaborative, and comprehensive family, community, and school support system. Underlying this effort were two notions: that families, communities, and schools are interconnected; and that children learn best when these three worlds interrelate and support each other. *Children Achieving* called for organizations and structures inside and

[28] Christman, *Guidance for school improvement in a decentralizing system.*

[29] E. Foley, *Restructuring student support services: Redefining the role of the school district.* Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania, 1998.

[30] TAPAS meeting notes, 1998.

[31] R.C. Neild and C.C. Weiss, *Philadelphia education longitudinal study (PELS): Report on the transition to high school in the School District of Philadelphia.* Philadelphia: Philadelphia Education Fund, 1999.

[32] Rhodes and Manz, *Bringing school reform to the public.*

outside the District to link community, parents, and schools.

The District established the Family Resource Network[33] with the purpose of coordinating school-level social services and community involvement. At the cluster level, Family Resource Network staff offered on-site services such as counseling and referred children and families to non-district social service providers. The 1999-2000 annual report of the Family Resource Network reported success in the following areas: a 37 percent increase in the number of students with documented health insurance, increased professional development for school counselors and psychologists, and various programs to increase school safety. The mission of the Family Resource Network also included increasing family and community involvement through volunteerism. Early in the reform, the Family Resource Network implemented summer institutes for parents and community members with the dual goals of building a volunteer base and informing parents about community services. The summer institutes were more successful at information sharing than in recruiting volunteers, although the number of community volunteers did increase during *Children Achieving*.[34]

[33] The Family Resource Network consisted of staff at the central office and cluster offices dedicated to facilitating connections among families, communities, and local schools, including linking families to social services.

[34] A systematic accounting, however, of the types of volunteers (mentors, readers, clerical, etc.) and the segments of the community they represent (parents, church members, etc.) has not been devised, thus it is unclear to what degree the volunteer base was composed of parents.

By the end of the *Children Achieving* reform initiative, the Family Resource Network was beginning to augment its emphasis on coordinating community services and was turning more explicitly toward parent involvement efforts. According to one central office staff member, the Family Resource Network expected to formulate a "workable plan" to develop partnerships with community organizations in hope of promoting greater parental involvement and advocacy.[35] In addition to increasing the number of mentors and partners within the faith community, the Family Resource Network hoped to educate parents about school processes, available resources, and teaching and learning strategies they could employ at home. This was a promising turn of events, but it still retained the one-way, school-to-parent approach to parent involvement.

In addition to the community outreach work by the Family Resource Network, the central office worked with community-based organizations that pre-dated *Children Achieving*. Leaders from the advocacy community met regularly with the District superintendent. Many of these groups had their own agendas that sometimes corresponded with and sometimes diverged from the *Children Achieving* vision. Nonetheless, a number of community agencies supported the *Children Achieving* agenda in various ways to create opportunities for parent participation in public schools. The agencies disseminated information regarding school policies, provided parent training to support children's learning in the home, and developed

[35] Interview, 2000.

parents' abilities as advocates for their children. Aspira, a community-based group serving the Latino community, conducted parent workshops designed to teach parents about school processes and structures, as well as to build self-esteem and improve student learning. The Philadelphia Home and School Council distributed information about school policies in an effort to create awareness of student and parent rights. The Philadelphia Education Fund conducted parent institutes to inform parents about what standards-based learning should look like in the classroom. The efforts of these groups were guided by the *Children Achieving* reform agenda, but ultimately were shaped by each organization's mission and goals.[36]

Although *Children Achieving* did influence the activities of intermediary organizations, these agencies (with the exception of the Philadelphia Education Fund which had a close working relationship with the District) believed that they were outside the reform.[37] In fact, many community-based organizations expressed dissatisfaction with both the theory and implementation of *Children Achieving*, because *Children Achieving* claimed that parents and community members were "full partners," but the District did not enforce parental participation in school governance.

There is ample evidence that the *Children Achieving* vision of parents as education leaders and collaborators with teachers and principals in school reform was shortsighted or that the *Children Achieving* reformers never fully realized the implications of inviting parents into new roles and relationships. Despite the *Children Achieving* rhetoric, however, the reform did not take account of how deeply unsettling shifting the balance of power among schools, parents, and community would be to many principals and teachers. Reform planners underestimated what it would take for schools, especially in low-income, racially-isolated neighborhoods, to turn themselves around and work with parents as collaborators in school reform. Furthermore, once high-stakes accountability testing and the Performance Review Index were in place, many principals and teachers became even more suspicious and fearful of those they perceived as outsiders.

The problems of implementing *Children Achieving* were intertwined with the political climate in Philadelphia. The need for an appearance of unity to successfully lobby for school funding in Harrisburg often overshadowed parental involvement efforts and other aspects of reform. The commitment of time and resources needed to reconstruct relationships, roles, and power imbalances at the school level, for example, was overwhelmed by desire for a large, vocal parent base to lobby state government for increased school funding. The superintendent and the *Children Achieving* Challenge became more interested in harmony among parent groups and a united front on funding issues than in working through the contentious new meanings

[36] D. Brown and N. Edgecombe, *Parent groups in Philadelphia: A snapshot*. Internal memorandum to Research for Action, 1998.

[37] Ibid.

of parent involvement. The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers regarded local school councils as an indicator of the superintendent's (and therefore that of the *Children Achieving* reform) disregard for teachers and their professional integrity. These factors (as detailed in the Alliance Organizing Project case study in the second part of this report) contributed to complicating the already-difficult work of making parents full partners in school reform.

In summary, parents, communities, and schools did become more connected during the *Children Achieving* reform through efforts by the District and community groups to increase information sharing, volunteers in the schools, and parent education opportunities. These were, however, traditional school-directed and school-managed parent involvement activities. The vision of revising relations between parents and schools was largely compromised. The next part of this report, however, closely examines two cases where strong efforts were made to include parents in new roles as leaders and collaborators in reform. These case studies highlight the challenges and rewards that arise when the rhetoric of parents as full partners in school reform is closer to reality.

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TWO CASE STUDIES: PARENTS AS COLLABORATORS IN SCHOOL REFORM

INTRODUCTION

The twin goals of the *Children Achieving* reform initiative — implementing standards and accountability, and transforming relations between local schools and the local community — seemed complementary. The discourse about mutual accountability included everyone from the central office and the schools to the family and community. Every party had a role in ensuring that schools had the resources needed and offered the kind of instruction and curriculum that would make children world-class citizens. In this discourse, parents and other stakeholders were to assume roles as education leaders. Standards were seen as emerging from a local and national dialogue among administrators, teachers, parents, policymakers, and the broader community, including business and academic interests.

A concurrent discourse about high expectations, the belief that *all* children could reach the standards, implied that a change in adult attitudes could alter the performance of low-income, racially-, ethnically-, and linguistically-minority students. Such a sea change in attitudes and beliefs would mean that principals and teachers would not dwell on deficits in the skills that schoolwork demands and values, but would look for the assets of urban communities and families. The discourse about high expectations presumed a transformation of relations between principals and teachers and parents. Bringing parents into local schools as education leaders appeared to be a key strategy.

Philadelphia's standards-based reform initiative included an assessment system that examined five indicators[38] and either rewarded a school's progress or sanctioned its decline. In addition, the graduation and promotion policy eliminated social promotion and raised the stakes for students. As the assessment system was implemented, school staff members perceived that they disproportionately carried the burden for accountability and responded by focusing on raising test scores. Principals and teachers demanded curriculum from the central office that was aligned with the standardized assessment (SAT-9) and professional development to support the curriculum. In all likelihood, most educators did not perceive parents as critical to raising test scores. Parents' roles as education leaders in the schools may have seemed, at best, irrelevant or benign because educators had little sense of what parents had to offer. At worst, parents might raise issues that were counterproductive because they diverted attention from raising test scores. The quick institution of high-stakes assessments narrowed, rather than broadened, views about how to make and sustain change, and

[38] The five indicators, embodied in a Professional Responsibility Index and used to measure progress included: standardized test scores, teacher and student attendance, and promotion and persistence rates.

overlooked the need to build the capacity for a standards-driven system.

Almost all urban educators would say they value the support of parents and few would dispute the positive potential effect of parent involvement for individual students, but sharing education leadership with parents is not always a comfortable notion, nor is it necessarily regarded as important to school reform. Many educators perceived the *Children Achieving* rhetoric that invited parents to be leaders and to share power in areas where they lacked expertise as violating professional authority and norms. Some principals and teachers resisted power-sharing and associated it with previous community-control initiatives. Other educators believed that the effort to include parents as leaders was irrelevant to changing students' academic outcomes. Still others either did not have the experience or vision to include parents as authentic players in school reform. During a period of high-stakes accountability, parents were often regarded warily as watchdogs and threats to job security. The slow process of learning to build new kinds of parent-educator relations was often perceived as still another of the many unrelated burdens of reform.

Those in the District who supported a shift in parent-educator relations, who believed that parents as collaborators and education leaders could make important contributions to school reform, underestimated the challenges of parents assuming new roles in schools. With few exceptions, principals and teachers did not receive the kind of professional development or other kinds of support they needed to make deep kinds of relational changes. When opportunities for professional development were available, recruitment and attendance were uneven. As time passed, even District and *Children Achieving* Challenge[39] staff who rhetorically supported greater parental participation, worried that active groups of parents might obstruct the forward motion of other aspects of reform. These supporters often adopted strategies to quiet dissension rather than build the participation of parents. The commitment to building parent leaders remained a rhetorical part of *Children Achieving*, but the support for this component generally dwindled and the efforts were marginalized.

Nonetheless, efforts to make parents into change agents did develop in a few places. The following case studies are about the work of the Alliance Organizing Project (AOP) and Teachers and Parents and Students (TAPAS). Both case studies relate what it takes to transform the roles of parents and the relationships among principals, teachers, and parents at the local level, and how initiatives that include parents as education leaders can enhance standards-based reform.

The AOP and the TAPAS case studies have distinct histories. The two existed as both part of, and apart from, *Children Achieving*. This inside/outside relationship was key to the working of

[39] The Philadelphia *Children Achieving* Challenge, established in 1995, was created through a grant from the Annenberg Foundation and matching support from other public and private funders. Over five years, the Challenge invested over $150 million in the *Children Achieving* reforms.

both groups. AOP was much more visible than TAPAS and there was more conflict surrounding AOP. In part this was because AOP was a larger initiative that was funded through and closely identified with the *Children Achieving* reform (which itself was controversial, especially inside schools). AOP was also perceived as potentially contentious because it evolved from a community-driven initiative that reached into schools to build relationships with educators. TAPAS, in contrast, was smaller, less public, and sponsored as part of the *Children Achieving* evaluation. TAPAS was grounded in the Philadelphia Writing Project and built on existing relationships between teachers and parents already active in the school community. Nonetheless, once teachers and parents began talking from their differing perspectives and experiences, differences and controversies developed. The two case studies will demonstrate how both AOP and TAPAS applied processes and practices of research, inquiry, and action to their work that encouraged parent leadership. As exemplars, the two case studies provide ideas about the conditions needed for such collaborative relations and about the significant contributions parents can make when they assume leadership roles.

THE ALLIANCE ORGANIZING PROJECT CASE STUDY: ORGANIZING FOR SCHOOL REFORM

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

[The Alliance Organizing Project's] mission is to help parents and communities to build schools where all children achieve at high levels...AOP understands that long-term systemic change in public schools will not come through administrative legislation alone. Changes within public schools must also occur through changes in the relationships among parents, teachers and school administrators.[40]

The Alliance Organizing Project had a complex inside-outside relationship with the Philadelphia School District. AOP was an autonomous organization initiated as part of the *Children Achieving* reform plan. The *Children Achieving* Action Design stated that "an organizing strategy independent of the District must be accepted and supported so that new relationships of mutual accountability between schools, parents, and communities can emerge at the grass roots level."[41] AOP was designated in the Action Design as the group to carry out the organizing activities. The *Children Achieving*

[40] Alliance Organizing Project, *From protest to power: The evolution of AOP*. Philadelphia: Author, 1998.

[41] School District of Philadelphia, *Children Achieving strategic action design 1995-1999*, p. 1.

Action Design included the work of AOP, so funding for AOP, similar to other reform initiatives, was channeled through the Philadelphia *Children Achieving* Challenge. AOP received approximately $3.5 million over the five years of *Children Achieving*. Although the *Children Achieving* Challenge monitored AOP work, its policy and direction were set by its board of directors, not by the *Children Achieving* Challenge or the District.

The idea to create a parent-organizing initiative evolved from the confluence of several interests. A number of close observers of previous Philadelphia school reform efforts, largely from public education advocacy groups, had noted that decentralization efforts in the 1980s were weakened by failure to galvanize the participation of parents and community members in school-based governance. Many from these advocacy groups believed that reform in Philadelphia was in stasis, with no organized force strong enough to overcome the gridlock created by the competing interests of the central office, the teachers union, and the city. By the early 1990s, several people from public education advocacy groups had started thinking more seriously about the need to organize parents and community members on a neighborhood basis as a new force to move reform forward.

When David Hornbeck became the new superintendent in Philadelphia, he already had ideas about the powerful role community organizing could play in school reform. His ideas dovetailed with the ideas of those already working in this arena. He promoted the notion of the "empowered community" as important partners in the District in reform:

...it's a question of the community itself being empowered and setting its own agenda or at least setting an agenda as a partner with the School District. The only way I know how to do that is if there is such a community that is organized.[42]

The superintendent, working with members of the advocacy community, advanced a reform plan that included a community-organizing component. Working in tandem, they made AOP a part of the *Children Achieving* Action Design. AOP would be an organization that provided training and support for community organizers who in turn would bring parents together in school-based Parent Leadership Teams. These teams would address issues of concern to parents and, as education leaders, the Parent Leadership Teams would collaborate with educators to achieve change.

The intent was for AOP to have organizers working in all of the District's 22 clusters. AOP organizing, however, never expanded beyond 12 clusters. Parent teams were active in 30 of 260 District schools. The initial AOP organizing effort paralleled the implementation of *Children Achieving*, with AOP beginning work in the six initial clusters. In time, however, AOP efforts were concentrated in clusters and schools located in the lower-income African American and Latino sections of the city.

[42] Gold, *Community organizing at a neighborhood high school*, p. 56.

The limited outreach of AOP, despite its funding base, was due to several factors, including difficulties in gaining entry to schools, competition with other groups working with parents and community, and the growing pains of a new organization.

First, there was considerable misunderstanding and fear mixed with some positive response to the idea of AOP. Early on, Superintendent Hornbeck began hearing resistance within the District to the organizing initiative. He reported that his cabinet was "raising hell with me for the contentiousness...out there."[43] Neither Hornbeck nor others in the central office anticipated the resistance from local schools, especially among principals, that AOP organizers would meet as they prepared parents and community members to become co-leaders in education reform.[44] The orientation and reculturation that principals and teachers needed to work with parents in non-traditional roles were not part of the District's planning for professional development. A number of principals jumped to the conclusion early in the effort that AOP was adversarial and would blame them for their children's educational problems. These principals made it difficult and sometimes impossible for an AOP organizer to work in their schools.

Second, not all members of the advocacy community supported the formation of AOP. Some believed that the new organization would replace their work for and with parents, especially when they learned that all reform funding would be channeled through the *Children Achieving* Challenge and that AOP would be the designated parent group in the reform plan. In addition, some established volunteer groups, such as the Home and School Council, interpreted the formation of AOP as a negation of their historical work with parents, and challenged the commitment of a group that used paid organizers to work with parents. Tension between AOP and these other groups often hobbled AOP efforts.

Third, AOP was developing as an organization at the same time it was starting to work with parents, community members, and schools. The early years of AOP included missteps that required organizational readjustment. In addition to time absorbed by organizational development, the work of organizing parents was slower and more difficult than AOP founders had anticipated. AOP organizers often found themselves needing to negotiate between an entrenched parent culture of disengagement and mistrust of school professionals and a school culture that defined parent involvement as fundraising and volunteerism. Working in the education arena was a relatively recent community-organizing activity and there were few experienced organizers in the field.

Fourth, from the start, Superintendent Hornbeck was constantly looking for additional funds to support public education in Philadelphia. AOP was never funded sufficiently to support

[43] Ibid, p. 59.

[44] R.N. Solomon, "Conquering the fear of flying." *Phi Delta Kappan* 82 (2000), pp. 19-21.

organizers working in all 22 clusters.[45] The discomfort with AOP among school administrators and other parent involvement groups led the leadership of the *Children Achieving* Challenge to waver in their commitment to AOP. And because AOP organizing did not quickly mobilize a visible public mass base to support lobbying for school finance reform in Harrisburg, Hornbeck's commitment also seemed to falter. Over time, the staff at the *Children Achieving* Challenge, Superintendent Hornbeck, and the District became more interested in cooperation among the various groups working with parents, regardless of their different approaches to parent involvement, in order to avoid dissension.

Despite the difficulties in getting established and the resistance its organizers often encountered, in a few instances AOP's work with parents set in motion social processes leading to new dynamics among parents, community, and schools. This report takes an in-depth look at AOP's work at the Watkins Elementary School. We selected Watkins as an example of parent organizing because it is an information-rich story of the contributions that activated, engaged parents can make when regarded by school leaders as a resource and not a diversion.

[45] Interview with *Children Achieving* Challenge staff, 2000.

WATKINS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AND NEIGHBORHOOD

The news and papers always talk badly about poor neighborhoods. But it [Watkins' neighborhood] is a place where people love you and respect you. Kids want to learn. I feel like here children need a lot and are ready for it. It's exciting to me. People want to learn. It is a place I feel like I can make a difference.[46]

We are being neglected. We need more attention. We might be in North Philadelphia. We might be in the ghetto. But we are human beings.[47]

The neighborhood where Watkins Elementary School is located was once a thriving industrial area, but today it is an area of deep, concentrated poverty. Over the last 50 years, manufacturing and financial interests have exited the area and the effects of economic abandonment dominate the community: there are many boarded-up houses, empty warehouses, trash-strewn lots, and graffiti in the immediate vicinity of Watkins Elementary School. By the 1990s, media references to the area included frequent mention of the drug trade (and the accompanying violence and crime) that moved in as an alternative source of employment as the formal economy disappeared. With the flight of industry, many working-class White and African American people also left the area. The migration of Puerto

[46] Watkins Elementary School teacher interview, 5/25/2000.

[47] Watkins Elementary School parent at an AOP public action, 4/8/1999.

Ricans to this section of the city followed the constriction of the local economy. Today, the area is largely Puerto Rican with a smaller African American population and an even smaller scattering of White residents. Many residents receive welfare or work in low-paying, unstable service sector jobs, many outside the formal economy.[48] Despite the overall economic disintegration of the area, there are a substantial number of local and nationally-affiliated service-oriented and cultural groups committed to neighborhood improvement.

Watkins Elementary School is located on a corner within a densely-packed residential area broken by a few *bodegas*, small restaurants, and other small enterprises. The school is a three-story building constructed in the 1960s. The exterior has few street-level windows and reflects an architecture that barricades the school from the presumed dangers of its surrounds. Once inside, the school is orderly and friendly. Bulletin boards and a non-teaching assistant greet guests. Salsa music is playing in the office and office staff are friendly and attentive to visitors. The principal's office features an abundance of instructional materials and children's work. The stairwells are gaily painted with murals reflecting characters in children's literature and African American and Latino history.

Watkins is a K-6 school serving approximately 835 students. The student population reflects the demographics of the neighborhood: 96 percent of the students come from low-income families; 72 percent of the students are Latino, 27 percent African American, and one percent are White or Native American. The staff is 55 percent White, 30 percent African American, and 15 percent Latino. The principal is White and a School District veteran. He has been the principal of Watkins for the last dozen years. Before coming to Watkins, he was principal of another elementary school in the same general area of the city.

During the five years of *Children Achieving*, test scores at Watkins Elementary School climbed steadily. From 1995 to 2000, student scores in reading, mathematics, and science rose dramatically, with the number of students performing at or above basic levels more than doubling. During this same period, testing at Watkins became far more inclusive, with virtually all students tested by the 1999-2000 school year. This makes the school's progress in improving test scores even more impressive. Student and staff attendance rates also climbed, another factor calculated in the District's evaluation of school performance. Throughout the *Children Achieving* years, Watkins consistently met or surpassed district-set performance targets and, as a result, in the 1999-2000 school year Watkins was recognized as one of the top five elementary schools in the District.

AOP AT WATKINS

An AOP organizer first came to Watkins Elementary School in January 1999, three years after the initiation of AOP

[48] J. Goode and J.A. Schneider, *Reshaping ethnic and racial relations in Philadelphia: Immigrants in a divided city*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.

parent organizing, during which AOP had been working in other schools in the immediate area of Watkins. The organizer had joined AOP staff six months earlier. She was an experienced community organizer with several years' experience before joining the AOP staff, although new to parent organizing for school reform.

The organizing at Watkins and other schools in this neighborhood was supported by a multi-year grant from a local corporate donor to *Children Achieving*. The donor's commitment to this neighborhood was a result of its participation in the Philadelphia Plan, an effort by local corporate interests to sponsor community development in some of the poorest areas of Philadelphia. From the beginning, parent organizing at Watkins was conceptually linked to neighborhood improvement as well as to school reform. As neighborhood institutions, schools needed strengthening as part of a larger strategy to strengthen low-income communities.

When the AOP organizer began working at Watkins, she first established a relationship with the Watkins school counselor and the home-school coordinator who provided her with names of parents active at the school. The organizer was fortunate to meet two school staff members receptive to her request because this was not true for organizers at many other schools. Throughout the winter and spring of 1999, she contacted these parents who, in turn, introduced her to other parents. The AOP organizer met with parents individually in the school and at their homes and, as a group, in a nearby storefront church. By spring of 1999, she had identified a core group of 14 parents interested in being part of a Parent Leadership Team. This core group, similar to the school's demographics, included Latino and African American parents.

Once the core parent group had been established, the organizer arranged a meeting for herself and the parents with the Watkins principal. The purpose of this first meeting was to tell the principal that parents of Watkins students were interested in AOP training to become an AOP Parent Leadership Team at the school. The principal initially received the AOP organizer and parents with some uneasiness:

I was very apprehensive when they first approached me based on what I'd heard that as a group they [AOP] had caused more problems than assistance. I sat [the organizer] down and told her upfront I would welcome her efforts but if I saw they had any hidden agendas I would throw them out. But they've been very supportive. Maybe because they think I have a decent school.[49]

In fact, the Watkins parents spoke highly of the principal and generally believed that Watkins was a "decent" school where teachers and principal worked hard to help their children. Their support for the school, however, did not negate their belief that there were areas for improving students' school experience.

By late spring 1999, the core parent group, working under the guidance of

[49] Principal interview, 11/2/1999.

the AOP organizer, invited other parents to a public event convened to announce that they and the principal had reached an agreement on working together to improve children's school experiences. The agreement — AOP called it a covenant — was similar to agreements between parents and principals at other schools where AOP was active. It read:

We — the Principal and the [Watkins] AOP Parent Team — commit to work in partnership with each other to help children achieve at high levels. We will maintain open lines of communication and meet on an ongoing basis in an effort to share information and work for the good of the children. We will respect each other and each other's roles in the school community — the important role the Principal plays as the administrative and academic leader of the [Watkins Elementary] School and the important role that parents play as participants in the life of the school.

With the signing of the covenant, the AOP organizer and parents moved their meetings from the neighboring church to the Watkins Elementary School.

Despite his initial uneasiness about AOP, the principal believed that parent "involvement" was a missing part of the "puzzle" in making his school the strongest it could be; he hoped AOP training might be able to make parent involvement more than "just sell[ing] candy apples." Watkins was progressing according to the District's performance index, but the principal worried that the school staff would reach limits in the improvements they could make in children's school performance. The principal believed that parents' active participation might help provide him "with another level of support to break through that wall [to help all children achieve]." At his request, the AOP parent group began to rebuild the defunct Home and School organization, which he described as having been "2-3 ladies who did all the work."[50] The group organized Home and School Association elections and the AOP organizer began training parents to lead the meetings. Within the year, the work of the AOP parent team became nearly synonymous with that of the Home and School Association. During the 1999-2000 school year, 25 to 40 parents regularly attended Home and School meetings, the result of continuous outreach to the broader parent community by the AOP organizer and the parents she trained to hold one-on-one meetings and build trust with new parents. In addition, several teachers attended the meetings. The principal noted that the rejuvenation of the Home and School "changed the perceptions of teachers who came [to the meetings]. They saw parents who cared."[51] He believed this change was very important to teachers' investment in their classrooms and students. Whatever fears he may have had about AOP, he saw enough potential in the work of the AOP organizer and Parent Leadership Team that he gave room for the organizing process to grow.

[50] Principal interviews, 11/2/1999 and 3/14/2000.

[51] Principal interview, 3/14/2000.

THE WATKINS SAFETY CAMPAIGN

During their initial meetings the AOP organizer worked with the Watkins' parent group to generate a list of concerns they had about their children's school experience. The parents identified 23 concerns which fall into five categories: the need for greater safety in and around the school, after-school programs, additional staffing, more instructional materials, and stronger school structures for parental participation in decisions affecting their children's school experience. The overwhelming majority of concerns, 16 of 23, related to safety issues. A researcher's field notes from an AOP meeting indicate the vigilance parents felt was needed to protect their children:

Several mothers at the meeting expressed anxiety about their children getting to school safely. The heavy traffic on several corners is a concern, but there is an undercurrent to their anxiety related to feelings that there are many kinds of predators in the area. Several mothers said that they try to walk their children to school every day, or get a neighbor to do so, but worry because it is not always possible. One woman mentioned she fears for her 10-year-old daughter, who she says does not look 10 but much older. A man talked about the need for men in the community to do something if they love their children. He described another neighborhood where the men patrol the corners.[52]

[52] Researcher's field notes, 3/8/1999.

In keeping with their strong concern about safety in the neighborhood, the parents decided, in the winter of 1999, to focus their first campaign on getting more crossing guards assigned to the heavily-trafficked corners around the school. In addition to making street crossings safer, the parents believed that additional crossing guards meant more adults would be keeping watch on the street, thereby discouraging harm to the children. Simultaneously, they wrote letters in support of the faculty who were petitioning the District for a safe parking area. The activity of the parents was a radical departure from the usual role of parents in schools. It is not generally part of the school culture for parents collectively to generate a list of concerns and determine a course of action to address the concerns.

The crossing guard campaign had several dimensions. First, the Watkins parent group discussed their concern with other AOP parent groups at a citywide AOP meeting. They learned that parents from eight of the 12 schools where AOP was working at that time also perceived the need for additional crossing guards to ensure the safety of children going to and coming from school. Three of these other schools were in the immediate area of Watkins Elementary School. Over several months, AOP organizers helped parents from Watkins and the other AOP schools to research the history of the assignment of crossing guards. The research consisted of meeting to discuss their concerns with local police captains, District officials, political representatives, and other parents from their school communities.

The parents learned that the Philadelphia police had conducted a crossing guard needs survey in 1996, the findings of which indicated that several hundred fewer crossing guards were assigned to corners than needed. The parents stationed themselves at busy corners to count passing cars during the hours when children were going to or returning home from school in order to document the magnitude of the problem. In addition, parents collected stories of accidents at these corners. One Watkins parent related their effort to a local newspaper:

Over the last 20 years, we have seen our streets get more and more dangerous—drug dealing, prostitution, kidnapping, heavy traffic, you name[it]! At the same time, the number of crossing guards was decreased from three to one. Children have been hit. We, as parents, will not accept this! We are demanding additional crossing guards.[53]

The citywide AOP organization, which included organizers, parents, and other interested community members, sponsored a "public action," bringing together parents from the eight schools and representatives from the District, local elected officials, and the president of the Crossing Guard Union. The event was held at Watkins Elementary School and Watkins parents played a prominent role in leading the public action. At the event, the AOP parent teams reported what they had learned through their investigations and proposed potential solutions, soliciting the support of those present in solving the problem. The outcome was that two City Council representatives committed themselves to introducing a resolution to City Council that would authorize public hearings later that spring on the need to fund additional crossing guards.

Several new crossing guards were assigned immediately followed the hearings, but none were assigned to the corners closest to Watkins. In fall 1999, the AOP organizer continued to work with Watkins parents to gain additional crossing guards. The group decided to take direct action — blocking traffic at the corners closest to Watkins that the parents believed were most dangerous. One of the parent leaders (who had a grandson at the school, whose three children had attended Watkins, and now is a lunchtime aide at the school) posted fliers about the action throughout the school. A small group of Watkins' teachers joined the parents. One teacher explained:

We blocked traffic for three mornings. We didn't all go every day, but we went in small groups each day and joined with the parents. We had to leave to come back to class, while the parents continued. [The AOP parent leader] had a lot of respect in the school and she personally asked teachers to come. Her signs were all over [the school].[54]

The parent group also took their issue directly to Mayor Street when the newly- elected mayor held meetings at the high schools in each of the District's 22 clusters. The same teacher who described teacher participation with parents in blocking traffic commented:

[53] *Focus/Enfoque* 18 (1999).

[54] Teacher interview, 5/25/2000.

Parents never spoke out like this. I got a small group of teachers who had dinner together and then we went to [the neighborhood high school] too. We didn't go with the parents, but both parents and teachers were there to speak up about the same thing.[55]

This teacher perceived the AOP organizing process as having "created an opening" for her and other teachers at the school. She knew, however, that to build a teacher group similar to the parent group would take time: "AOP is empowering parents and they are doing things, and that makes teachers feel they want to give back. But I am just starting [to build a teachers' group at the school] and it will take a couple of years."[56] The safety campaign has helped to prepare for deeper relations between parents and teachers. Both teachers and parents appreciate that it will take time and more experience for both parents and teachers to form groups, to identify shared interests and ways to act together to build this emergent partnership.[57]

The Watkins After-School Homework Club

In addition to its campaign to make the school neighborhood safer, the AOP organizer and Parent Leadership Team established a parent-run after-school Homework Club at Watkins Elementary School. The need for safe and enriching after-school programs for their children was on the original list of concerns drawn up by the Watkins parents. Parents involved with AOP at other elementary schools in the neighborhood shared a similar concern for their children during the hours after school.

The Watkins parent group began work on establishing an after-school program in fall 1999. Watkins had an after-school academic enrichment program, but it targeted third and fourth-grade students to reinforce their preparation for the SAT-9 tests (the standardized high-stakes accountability administered in the District). The AOP parent group wanted to extend the benefits of extra help with schoolwork beyond the students who would be tested.

As a first step, the AOP organizer and a parent leader approached the principal to ask for his support in establishing an after-school program for students not served by the established program. The parents were asking, at this time, for space and whether teachers might staff the after-school club. The parent who attended the meeting said the principal told her, "I don't have the staff; I can't do that."[58] After leaving the meeting, the parent had the idea to create a parent-run program.

The AOP organizer guided the Watkins parents, as well as the parents from two neighboring schools, in writing funding proposals for after-school clubs focused on academic enrichment. Safe and Sound, a city agency, and the

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid.

[57] As result of AOP organizing, in fall 2000, 18 months after the initiation of the crossing guard campaign, the Philadelphia City Council approved funding for the police to add 37 crossing guards. The Watkins parent group continued its work to assure that the corners they had identified as dangerous would be among those covered when new crossing guards were hired.

[58] Parent leader interview, 11/9/1999.

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Philadelphia Education Fund, a non-profit educational organization, funded the programs. The Philadelphia Education Fund also provided training in instructional approaches and in homework help for the parents who would run the after-school programs. Several Watkins parents said that during the first few weeks of the homework club, teachers gave them pointers on classroom management.[59]

By spring 2000, four Watkins parents were running two After-School Homework Club classrooms, two days a week, for approximately 30 children. Mothers supervised the students as they did their assignments and played math and reading games. One mother said:

I didn't realize I liked work with kids until I did this. And I am learning by helping the kids. ...I am especially learning about games, such as dominos that can help kids learn math. Now I am doing games like these at home with my children.[60]

Another mother, who is Spanish-language dominant, regularly read books with children from the Watkins' English-as-Second-Language program and each week families of children who participated in the program received free books for their home libraries.

The Watkins After-School Homework Club helped to create new kinds of relations between parents and teachers that had implications for improving the school achievement of Watkins students. A few teachers directed children who needed extra support to the Homework Club. There was an especially close connection between one classroom teacher and the after-school program because a parent who volunteered in the teacher's classroom was also a parent-teacher for the Homework Club. In addition, the parent-teachers consulted with classroom teachers when selecting books for the Homework Club that children would take home. A few teachers noted that children whose homework was frequently incomplete, were starting to come to school with completed assignments.

In fall 2000, the Watkins Homework Club expanded to four classrooms, involving five parents (including one father) and 32 children from kindergarten through the second grade. The mission of the program was made clearer: it targeted children who were experiencing difficulty "in order to try to prevent problems later on."[61] More teachers were now aware of the program, and students from five of the seven K-2 classrooms were participating in the program. Notably, the teachers in classrooms where the after-school clubs met invited the parents and children to use their classroom materials including books, computers, and games.

In terms of reform efforts, the AOP work with Watkins parents was still in an early stage. The core parent leadership team had sustained itself over two years and members were developing leadership skills through

[59] Field notes of staff meeting, 3/13/2000.

[60] Parent leader interview, 5/25/2000.

[61] Focus group of parent after-school teachers, 12/5/2000.

AOP training, through their crossing guard campaign, and the after-school program efforts. In these two years, they had funding for additional crossing guards. They were also providing academic assistance to K-2 students that teachers had identified as needing extra attention. Families that participated in the after-school program were receiving books to build their home libraries. Through the Home and School organization, parents were continually reaching out to the larger parent community. The connection to the citywide AOP provided the Watkins parents with a like-minded community with whom they could take collective action on shared concerns at the District, city, and state political levels. Reflecting on AOP at Watkins, the principal observed:

They [AOP] brought out people's latent talents...They have identified parent leadership and are preparing them for their responsibilities in being leaders. They are helping to provide me with another level of support to break through that wall [to help all children achieve]. They are fostering the confidence of parents...I see parents putting together their resumes, using technology, and making out applications to come to tutor. I see them, with AOP's help, writing grants. They have honed their public speaking skills. They have been motivated to go outside the school to political events, like when Mayor Street was at [the local high school], and they are speaking up at these events about what is needed.[62]

With time and the guidance of an experienced organizer, parents at Watkins were taking up new roles in their children's schools, transforming a school culture in which parents had once stayed away.

DISCUSSION

The AOP parent organizing at Watkins is still young. The parent team, only two years old, is creating a parent base at Watkins, building structures for parent participation, and reaching out to teachers. In fall 2000, the original parent leaders were helping to build a second generation of parent leadership at the school. One member of the original group had become a paid part-time organizer with AOP and was planning to begin work with parents at another elementary school in the Watkins neighborhood.

Several factors came together to make Watkins a productive site for AOP organizing. First was a principal who was open to parent participation and saw parents as a potential resource for assisting him and the teachers in their goal to create an academically rigorous and nurturing environment for young children. In other schools, AOP organizing efforts were often thwarted when they met resistance from the principal. Second is the fact that one of the parents in the AOP group was already familiar to and respected by the principal and teachers. She was able to build on her past relationships with school staff to help create, on one hand, the trust parents needed and, on the other hand, to establish new kinds of working relationships with the principal and teachers. Her participation, in combination with the experienced AOP organizer, facilitated

[62] Principal interview, 3/14/2000.

and accelerated the organizing process at Watkins. Building trusting relationships and eventually authentic parent-educator partnerships is much harder, if not impossible, at schools where parents and educators are not familiar with one another. Third, there were a few teachers at Watkins who were responsive to the AOP initiative, including the union building representative. Inspired by the AOP effort, these teachers were beginning to form a teacher group parallel to that of the parents. The parent-professional divide typical in most schools has made the formation of reciprocal and complementary groups of parents and teachers a challenge at many other schools. Not insignificantly, perhaps because the Watkins parents felt positively about the principal and the teachers, the school staff perceived the activities of the AOP organizer and parent group as augmenting their efforts, not as a challenge to professional authority.

Even with the propitious conditions that existed at Watkins, two other factors were important to its success as an AOP organizing site. The work with parents in the Watkins neighborhood was part of a larger community development effort, and there were funds dedicated to working in this school over several years. Organizing parents is not a quick fix to parent involvement; it takes years to build, similar to building a parallel teachers group. It was critical that there was stable funding to support the work over time. Organizing parents to take leadership roles in school reform will inevitably have many setbacks and the pace of change can be discouragingly slow. The struggle to win the assignment of crossing guards, for example, took place over two years and demanded tremendous persistence on the part of the parents. It was a campaign that, arguably, no one else would have led, and if the parents had become discouraged, or the money supporting the AOP organizer had evaporated, the effort surely would have dissipated.

Parent involvement at Watkins Elementary School prior to the AOP organizing had been limited in several ways. Before AOP came to the school, as reported by the principal, the Home and School Association was defunct and, when it had existed, involved just a few parents focused largely on fundraising. As an intermediary organization working at the boundary of community and school, with a primary commitment to creating education leaders among parents, AOP was positioned to transform the nature of parent involvement through the roles parents played. The Watkins experience shows parents leading a political fight for additional city funding for crossing guards, and parents pushing for reallocation of resources to address needs of the city's lowest-income neighborhoods, needs that had implications for the climate of schooling. The parents, with AOP assistance, also sought resources and training to enable them to run an after-school program for children who needed extra support with their homework.

At Watkins, AOP outreach also changed the participation levels of parents. Prior to AOP, two or three

parents "did everything." The AOP organizer built a core group of more than a dozen parents and recruited several dozen more who were occasionally engaged in AOP activities. Still, the core group of parents frequently talked about the frustrations of overcoming a parent culture of distrust, apathy, and uninvolvement. Even at their strongest, they activated only a fraction of the parent body and wanted greater participation. Conversations about the limited number of involved parents took place at other AOP schools as well. Nevertheless, AOP organizing at Watkins has begun to build an external force with the potential to sustain reform at that school.

The changed levels of parent participation at Watkins Elementary School were beginning to set new social processes into action. The activity of the parents was spilling over into the life of the school. A small group of teachers and parents were working together in new ways. Teachers were stepping outside their classrooms to join parents in their political fight to make the school area safer; parents were becoming more comfortable in the school as they learned more about instruction and curriculum through their leadership in the Homework Club. Teachers were seeing parents make a contribution to children's learning, and were sharing their classroom resources — books, computers, and games — with them. This change in parent-educator relations helped build a school culture in which parent-educator partnerships and collaboration on shared interests could flourish.

The Watkins experience illustrates what urban parents can do when a process exists to bring them together to act on behalf of children. The AOP organizing process created a site for adult education: parents learned how to research an issue of concern; they were trained in classroom management, instruction, and curriculum; they learned to write funding proposals; they gained the confidence to interview public officials; they led public meetings; and they created a political campaign to focus attention on their children's needs. The AOP organizing process provided parents the opportunity to learn the skills of civic participation.

AOP built connections among Watkins parents that did not previously exist. While maintaining individual vigilance over their children's educational experience, the parent group moved collectively on issues they believed were critical to all the children in the school. The parent group increased the civic participation of parents in several ways, making for a more robust "public" in public education. Their efforts also had begun to create bridges between parents and professionals. Though not yet highly developed, the relations among parents and between parents and teachers might be the beginning of a new kind of social dynamic at the school, one characterized by mutual trust, bilateral (professional to parent *and* parent to professional) communication, and reciprocity. Such collaborative networks can be a basis, with other reforms, for mutual

accountability and a school climate conducive to student achievement.[63] The case study of AOP at Watkins Elementary School illustrates how a group external to the District used a community-organizing model to organize parents to become leaders and collaborators in school reform. AOP organizers, as part of the *Children Achieving* school reform in Philadelphia, entered schools and identified parents willing to be part of a Parent Leadership Team that would work to improve schooling of urban children. Our second case study, Teachers and Parents and Students, had a different starting point as part of the *Children Achieving* evaluation. Teachers working with the Philadelphia Writing Project invited parents to join them in examining how reform was taking hold in their schools. The parents added an element of urgency to this self-study of reform, driving the members of the inquiry community toward actions to improve the school experience of urban students.

THE TEACHERS AND PARENTS AND STUDENTS CASE STUDY: PARTICIPATORY INQUIRY INTO SCHOOL REFORM

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

In 1997 the Philadelphia Writing Project was asked to submit a proposal describing how it could complement and inform the ongoing systemwide evaluation of *Children Achieving* by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) and Research for Action. CPRE, Research for Action, and the Philadelphia Writing Project recognized that the perspectives of parents about school-site implementation of the *Children Achieving* Action Plan — especially reforms directly related to teaching and learning — were critical to understanding the success of *Children Achieving*. The Philadelphia Writing Project designed Teachers and Parents and Students (TAPAS) for collaborative inquiry, as a structure to bring together key stakeholders — parents, teachers, and students —to examine closely what was happening at different levels of the system as schools grappled with change. It was hoped that partnering parents with teachers and students in an ongoing inquiry community would yield useful insider snapshots of reform and would, over time, create and model meaningful parent engagement with schools. Participating parents brought unique viewpoints to the research process by virtue of their multiple positions within the school and at home, as members of the local school council, as school volunteers, and as school employees. Parents were a part of the shared history of the school, the classroom, and the neighborhood; indeed, parents helped to create that history as both actors and observers.

[63] A.S. Bryk, P.B. Sebring, D.Kerbow, S. Rollow, and J.Q. Easton, *Charting Chicago school reform: Democratic localism as a lever for change*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998. J.P. Comer, N.M. Haynes, E.T. Joyner, and M. Ben-Avie, *Rallying the whole village: The Comer process for reforming education*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1996. R. Putnam, *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.

Designing and implementing inquiry communities of practitioners has been the hallmark of the Philadelphia Writing Project since its inception at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education as an urban site of the National Writing Project 15 years ago. Teachers as well as parents, administrators, and school staff have come together in these school-based or cross-school communities to read, write, and talk about significant issues in teaching and learning by using the processes of "systematic and intentional inquiry."[64]

Parent involvement in inquiry communities first took place early in *Children Achieving* when the Philadelphia Writing Project and the Philadelphia Education Fund jointly sponsored an intensive summer institute on designing small learning communities. Parents also had some opportunities to participate through the Philadelphia Writing Project's role in Students at the Center, a four-year foundation-funded project on K-12 constructivist teaching and learning in two clusters. Although Writing Project teachers have conducted individual studies of parent involvement in their classrooms,[65] TAPAS presented a unique context for parents, teachers, and students to work together and improve understanding of the reform agenda from multiple perspectives.

The TAPAS group was formed by first identifying Philadelphia Writing Project teachers from six schools (three elementary, one middle, and two secondary schools) in two adjacent clusters having similar demographics. The six teachers had prior experience in inquiry communities and contact with parents who had become involved in the reform initiatives in some way. The teachers nominated seven parents who brought their experience as volunteers in classrooms and other settings, as school support staff, as members of school governance committees, or as parent organizers seeking improved school and classroom practices. The TAPAS school teams would work as co-researchers at their own schools. All members of the TAPAS community were to be regarded as experts with different experience and knowledge that they would bring to bear on the exploratory process of jointly studying the implementation of the reform agenda.

The racial composition of the TAPAS group and roles of group members were intentionally diverse. All parents in the group were African American; three teachers were White and three were African American. Three African American high school students joined the group later in the project. Two Philadelphia Writing Project members, both former District classroom teachers, one African American and the other White, facilitated the group. A White university-based researcher worked as

[64] See M. Cochran-Smith and S. Lytle, *Inside/outside: Teacher research and knowledge*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1993. S. Lytle, J. Christman, J. Cohen, J. Countryman, B. Fecho, D. Portnoy, and F. Sion, "Learning in the afternoon: When teacher inquiry meets school reform." In M. Fine (Ed.), *Chartering urban school reform*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1994.

[65] See, for example, M. Resnick, "Making connections between families and schools." In H. Banford, M. Berkman, C. Chin, B. Fecho, D. Jumpp, C. Miller, and M. Resnick (Eds.), *Cityscapes: Eight views from the urban classroom*. Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project.

the TAPAS community mentor and advisor. Overall, the TAPAS group included classroom teachers, high school students, a member of a local school council, a library assistant, a family center supervisor, parents active in the school in paid and unpaid positions, and university-affiliated facilitators.

The parents were motivated to participate in TAPAS for different reasons. Some parents saw the *Children Achieving* agenda as a significant shift in the stance of the District's central administration toward parents. As one parent explained the work of TAPAS in a presentation to a national audience:

Speaking as a parent, Children Achieving *seemed to me to be the best plan for parent and community involvement that I have seen in my history as a parent in the School District of Philadelphia. I have raised three children who were educated in the School District and participated as a Home and School member and school volunteer for many years prior to working in the Family Center at Herron. When my tenth-grade son disappeared on his way home from the first day of school in 1988, it really made me realize how important it is for parents to be aware of what is happening in the school community and to have a strong voice in decision-making, particularly around school safety issues. I started the Philadelphia Chapter of Parents and Friends of Missing Children in 1989 and became a strong advocate for rights of parents and children through school and community organizing.*

Parents in the TAPAS group were interested in the implications of standards-based reform within and across classrooms, in small learning communities, and in local school councils. This report presents what parents did in three specific inquiries: an inquiry in which a parent documented her work with another parent to improve understanding about the relationships of standards to classroom work and homework, an inquiry in which a parent worked with two teachers in a small learning community to develop systematic mentoring and advocacy for students who have not traditionally been college-bound, and a third inquiry in which a parent documented the way he used his membership on the local school council to investigate school practices and foster change. In each inquiry, the parent used an existing structure in innovative ways to investigate something she or he considered important about student learning and achievement. Taken together, the three examples provide rich information about ways that parents can become actors in standards-driven reform initiatives.[66]

[66] The data for this case study were drawn from a larger corpus collected over two-and-a-half years by participants and facilitators of the TAPAS group. From 1997-1999, the Philadelphia Writing Project facilitators documented the work of the TAPAS by writing analytic memos based on participants' session reaction sheets; conducting periodic interviews with participants; making transcripts of audio-tapes of TAPAS meetings and notes of meetings with school teams; and analyzing participants' reflective journal entries, essays, and final reports of their inquiries.

TAPAS AS AN INQUIRY COMMUNITY

TAPAS was organized to provide opportunities for regular conversations among participants with intervals for collecting site-based data between sessions. Six school teams of teachers and parents met together after school for two-to-three hours every two weeks, sometimes on Saturdays, over two-and-a-half years. Their sessions focused on sharing data and getting feedback for their site-based inquiries. TAPAS held summer retreats in 1997 and 1998 involving participants in development of research questions, data collection, data analysis, and report writing. Individual school parent-teacher teams also met outside the full TAPAS community meetings to plan aspects of the inquiry related to their schools. In some cases, the parent-teacher team carried out inquiries based on a single, shared question; in others, parents and teachers developed separate questions. All inquiries were driven by questions related to the implementation of standards, particularly the standards for writing and literacy. Parents looked for evidence in instructional practice and student work; in the goal-setting, organization, and curriculum of small learning communities; in local school council agendas and meetings; and even in the homes of families in their school community. All of this work entailed new relationships between and among TAPAS participants and other parents at the schools, intentionally crossing and reconfiguring traditional boundaries.

To establish common ground among TAPAS participants, one of their first tasks was to collect information about the implementation of *Children Achieving* and the level and type of current parent involvement in their schools. Each school team was to ascertain where their school was in establishing small learning communities and local school councils, to describe how the Home and School Association functioned at their school, and to note the range of ways parents seemed to be involved in school life. This initial data collected by school teams revealed several things: that the *Children Achieving* reform agenda was interpreted differently at the six TAPAS schools, that implementation of local school councils and small learning communities was not uniform, and that there were discrepancies between the impressions of parents and those of teachers of what was happening. TAPAS participants became aware of the distinctive culture in each school; they saw how their diverse group could provide a rich context for making sense of what was happening, despite (or perhaps because of) the inevitable tensions within the group. As part of the process of inquiry, TAPAS sometimes used transcripts of group sessions to seed conversations about intragroup dynamics and to explore the different perspectives of group members.

Each school team developed its own lines of inquiry based on the TAPAS focus on *Children Achieving*. The lines of inquiry fell into four categories of questions:

- **Changes in teacher practice.** How do TAPAS teachers in an English/Language Arts and Science

classroom move toward standards-driven instruction? How does the Library Power program affect classroom practices? What consequences do teachers and librarians see for student learning?

- **Understanding and meeting student needs.** How does the comprehensive support process help underachieving students to meet standards?

- **Altering learning environments.** How can teachers and parents from a small learning community create a school and classroom environment that sets high standards and supports student learning and achievement?

- **New roles of school organization in relation to improving teaching and learning.** How does the local school council influence discipline policy and changes in school practices?

Parents and teachers observed, interviewed, and collected documents pertinent to their own questions. Data sources included curriculum mapping charts, school surveys, student work, weekly field notes, local school council documents, student interviews, lesson plans, homework assignments, journal entries, classroom vignettes, and interim reports. Data were collected in classrooms, small learning communities, school council meetings, and student homes.

The following sections of the TAPAS case study describe three inquiries involving different participants — parent-parent, parent-student-teacher, and parent-whole school — and investigating different structures. These three sections illustrate different ways that parent interests and actions can contribute to the school's reform agenda.

PARENT-PARENT INQUIRY: STUDYING HOME AND SCHOOL CULTURES

The Herron Elementary School is located in a predominantly African American neighborhood that at one time was home to middle- and working-class families. What once was a thriving community of African American homeowners and shopkeepers is now marked by abandoned homes and a few African American businesses. Most of the middle-class families have moved away and many remaining parents are unemployed. Ninety percent of Herron students qualify for the free and reduced-price lunch program.

Built in 1909 for 600 students, Herron is now the home for 850 students. To relieve overcrowding, four kindergarten classes are taught in a neighboring church. Through the Family Center established in 1993 (before the advent of *Children Achieving*), Herron was already trying to build a culture of respect that involved students, parents, school staff, and the broader community. The *Children Achieving* reform agenda pushed Herron further in its efforts to reach parents and find ways of working collectively to create a richer educational environment.

One parent in the TAPAS group, the supervisor of the Family Center housed

in Herron, wanted to learn more about how standards influenced children as learners inside and outside school. In her TAPAS report, she explained two concerns that informed the development of her inquiry question:

I recognize that some of the parents I work with feel like outsiders in their home school community. Changes in the school structure such as SLCs [small learning communities], and the push for changes in the academic program due to the district-wide adoption of standards are either unknown or not understood by many parents...In my initial inquiry as a TAPAS participant I did extensive interviewing of Family Center parents and other community members who come to get resources and support. In addition, I made observations during school hours of parent-teacher interactions and attended after-school parent-teacher events. Parent descriptions of these interactions [with teachers] as jargon-filled, non-productive experiences makes me feel that the current parent-teacher relationship is not one that will result in parents and teachers working together to improve student achievement.

This parent held many meetings with other parents to acquaint them with the District's standards and the concept of small learning communities. She said the primary goal of her work was "to deepen parent knowledge and to engage parents in a critical examination of school and classroom practices." The parents in this community, like parents generally, were interested in helping their children achieve.

After a series of conversations with parents in the Family Center, this parent decided to investigate learning in school and out by inquiring specifically into the learning environment of one parent's home. She selected a parent who was a frequent visitor to the Family Center and whose first-grade child, according to his teacher, exhibited some difficulty in reading. The TAPAS-investigating parent was interested in how the child interpreted what was required by the homework and what role the child's parent played. In addition, the TAPAS parent wondered whether the parent would develop a greater sense of ownership of school reform efforts if she saw evidence of standards in the homework and if she became more vocal about what she thought should be happening in school and class.

Before visiting the home, the TAPAS parent shared her thoughts, concerns, and expectations with the TAPAS group, "The mom and I have talked about some questions she had about...her son's report card. I feel that [she] does not feel comfortable talking with her son's teacher. I hope that my involvement will help her communicate her concerns about her son with his teacher. I talked to the teacher to let her know what I'd be doing with mom. She welcomed my involvement." The parent to be visited was the newly-elected president of the Home and School Association. This woman told the TAPAS parent that she was fearful of talking to her son's teacher because of her own poor performance in school. These fears led her to believe that other parents in the school were going to criticize her leadership and that she

was not going to meet their expectations.

The TAPAS parent took field notes during a series of home visits and collected several weeks of the child's homework assignments, all of which she shared with the full TAPAS group. The group discussion revealed a wide range of views about the interpretation of these documents. Some thought the first-grade assignments for Herron School were substantially different from those used at other schools in the two clusters represented. This raised questions about differences in the interpretation of standards across schools. Issues related to the gap between the rhetoric and reality of standards-driven reform were raised and debated. Teachers and parents in the large TAPAS group wondered: In what sense is homework an extension of classroom life? What do homework assignments reveal about what is going on in the classroom? Is it reasonable to think that parents can actually see evidence of standards in their children's homework? Do some teachers have low expectations for some children that are reflected in these assignments? Is the problem related to mandating homework five days a week for first-grade students?

The conversation also surfaced intragroup differences regarding home culture and learning, as evidenced by the wide range of perspectives on what was a supportive home environment. Most of the TAPAS group members were critical of this family's noisy household. Many members commented on the central presence of the TV and the mother's seemingly peripheral role in overseeing the homework's completion. One parent who is also a teacher in a suburban school district, however, challenged the group to provide evidence that the household environment was unconducive to learning. Describing her own similar childhood experiences, she helped members of the group to re-examine their assumptions. This small, focused mini-case study opened discussions of topics central to parents' and teachers' daily interactions, sharpened sensitivity to unexamined assumptions, and fostered deeper and more substantive exchanges, across roles, about critical issues of teaching and learning.

PARENT-TEACHER-STUDENT INQUIRY: STUDYING SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Another TAPAS team was from DuBois High School, located in a racially-isolated, low-income neighborhood. Like many other city high schools, DuBois appeared to have relatively little parent involvement. As a result of participating in TAPAS, however, the high school's Media Technology small learning community, parents, and teachers formed a partnership to improve students' academic success. They worked closely to create what they termed a "college culture" and to prepare students for higher education.

Two teachers, two twelfth-grade students, and one parent documented the work of the Media Technology small learning community as it tried to change the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of adults and students. The group took a fresh look at what was happening in their small learning

community by using interviews and questionnaires, observing small learning community meetings, and recording vignettes and keeping field notes. They discovered inequitable funding among the small learning communities, limited parent-teacher contact, student apathy, unstable school leadership, and uneven implementation of standards. They documented a dramatically changing school environment that was especially affected by the installation of a new small learning community coordinator and the imminent departure of the principal.

The TAPAS team started to explore complex questions about teaching and learning and their own perceptions of the educational program at DuBois. They asked: "Have we really prepared our students for college? Why didn't more of our students take the PSAT in the eleventh grade? Why aren't some of our best students applying to college? Why aren't the students who showed academic promise in high school successful in post-high school education or training programs?" They used their research as a tool in observing and questioning their own practices as teachers and parents. They reflected regularly on how they worked as a team, how they identified and defined the problems, and how they understood one another's perspective.

The DuBois TAPAS team envisioned a small learning community that had more focused and integrated content, that had a more academically challenging curriculum supported by new technologies, and that prepared students for a successful life after graduation. With these ideas in mind, the TAPAS team spearheaded two media technology initiatives in the small learning community. The first TAPAS initiative was active involvement with CoNect (the school's technologically-focused research-based school improvement model) in designing project-based learning experiences for the students. The second TAPAS initiative was creation of the Achiever's Club, an enrichment program to provide additional support to high-achieving students in the small learning community.

The DuBois TAPAS team emphasized improving communication between the home and the school. They designed a comprehensive calendar that included important milestones and other information such as the appropriate sequence for taking academic classes (Algebra I, Biology, Chemistry), PSAT and SAT test dates, due dates for college and scholarship applications, and college tour information. The TAPAS team also provided parents with information about acquiring computers for home use.

The parent member of the TAPAS team regularly contacted other parents in the small learning community to learn their views about the changes being implemented and contacted area businesses about providing internships and other support for Media Technology students. The team decided early in the process that parent collaboration was critical to the success of the program, as evidenced in this excerpt from a letter about the Achiever's Club:

We are pleased to inform you that your son/daughter has been selected to be a part of a new program within the Media Technology community. The name of the program is the Achiever's Club. Students were selected by one or more of their teachers last year. The selection was based on your son/daughter's willingness to learn, demonstrated potential, and/or academic achievement. Ms. Brown, an active parent of a senior, is focusing on the parents and guardians to keep you informed of goals, activities, programs, etc. that we are implementing. We know that the most successful students have active parents/guardians. Our goal is to keep you as informed as possible to help your son/daughter to be prepared for post-high school education. We look forward to much more communication with you during the remaining time your son/daughter will be at DuBois.

The TAPAS team, in collaboration with other members of the Media Technology small learning community, attempted to create an Achiever's Club group identity through frequent letters sent to parents and students and through conversations about the club and its members in small learning community meetings and classes. The Media Technology small learning community also worked with University of Pennsylvania professors and students to support a college-level course taught at DuBois. University of Pennsylvania students also attended the class so college and high school students had opportunities to interact with each other.

The wider TAPAS community influenced the context for parent involvement in the Media Technology small learning community. The parent member of the team wrote in her journal:

As a parent, I wanted to know what my son was learning, how he was being taught, who his teachers were, and the type of environment in his classes. Each year in the Media Technology small learning community has been a learning experience for me and my son. I've learned a lot about standards. I've learned there are standards set for each grade and by talking to teachers, participating in SLC [small learning community] meetings, and having questions answered at TAPAS, I've learned what those standards are...

One of the teachers on the team wrote:

I like to pride myself on being open, accessible, and understanding when it comes to the parents and guardians of my students. However, my involvement in TAPAS has really opened my eyes to the many aspects of parent concerns that I did not think about. Too often as teachers/administrators we take for granted what parents know and don't know and how they feel. Working in this group has given me a keener ear to listen to parent concerns and questions and try to address them in our SLC [small learning community]. TAPAS puts teachers and parents on the same level, with children as our common denominator. We see the educational process better from both perspectives. This group has helped address the old problem of parent involvement and has offered new ways to better involve parents in their child's education.

The work of the TAPAS community as a whole was a source of insight about parent experiences beyond DuBois. The larger TAPAS group gave parents and teachers opportunities to alter their perceptions and relationships related to issues of standards and student achievement.

PARENT-WHOLE SCHOOL INQUIRY: STUDYING THE ROLE OF A LOCAL SCHOOL COUNCIL

Rosemont is a small K-4 elementary school located in Franklintown, a mixed-race middle- and low-income enclave bordered by two leading universities and by Gotham, a low-income and poor African American neighborhood. Some children from Franklintown attend Rosemont, but the majority of the students live outside its boundaries (including some from Gotham). Rosemont has been an integrated school for most of its existence, and is currently one of the District's desegregation magnet schools. At the inception of the TAPAS group, Rosemont student enrollment was 23.9 percent White, 62.6 percent African American, 9.5 percent Asian, and four percent Hispanic. The school enjoyed a good academic reputation and in 1998 ranked sixth in the District in reading and math proficiency scores. Many Rosemont graduates eventually attend one of the District's highly-touted magnet schools.

Rosemont parents have a strong sense of ownership about their school and are vocal about what they think the school should be doing. Rosemont has a history of strong parent involvement, stemming originally from its largely college-educated White middle-class parent base. Parent involvement began to shift in the late 1990s to include more African American parents. In 1996 an African American man was elected president of the Home and School Association and awarded a seat on the local school council. The Rosemont school council was a contested site for parent involvement in school governance. The Rosemont staff regarded *parent involvement* as an important part of their school's success. But, historically there has been some staff ambivalence about parent participation in school *decision-making*.

In general, many Philadelphia school professionals believe that "local school councils have more potential to improve school processes (such as communications and relationships with parents) than classroom teaching and learning."[67] Negotiations between the Philadelphia School District and the teachers union about the composition of local school councils and their rights and responsibilities contributed to miscommunication and misunderstandings that have often hindered effective collaboration on local school councils in the District. The Rosemont local school council, the Rosemont TAPAS team, and the wider TAPAS community were no exceptions.

As the Rosemont TAPAS team began to collect the data on parent involvement, they encountered the complexity of making decisions as a team and in attaching meaning to the information collected. Interviews with Rosemont school staff and parents

[67] Christman, *Guidance for school improvement in a decentralizing system*, p. 17.

yielded a wide range of views. These included questions about: whether the school was actually divided into small learning communities, the level and significance of parent involvement, and whether the newly formed school council was going to make a meaningful contribution to the school.

The effectiveness of local school councils was a generally contested issue within the large TAPAS group. Many of the people serving on the councils expressed an optimistic perspective about the councils' ability to effect change while those outside the council expressed doubts. It is likely that the union's guarded support of local school councils and their role in setting school policy influenced many teachers' perceptions of the councils' ability to make a difference in teaching and learning. These differing perspectives persisted as TAPAS team members began considering seemingly unconnected issues relating to discipline and to teaching and learning at Rosemont. African American staff members brought the large number of African American boys referred to the disciplinary accommodation room to the attention of the person who, concurrently, served as president of the Home and School Association, on the local school council, and on the Rosemont TAPAS team. In turn, he decided to raise the matter at the local school council; he also decided to focus his TAPAS work on an inquiry into the power of the council to affect school practices, specifically in relation to what he believed was racial bias in referrals to the accommodation room.

To investigate the referrals of African American boys to the accommodation room, this parent took field notes at local school council sessions; examined accommodation room data in terms of age, gender, grade, and race of students referred; and the race of the referring teacher. His data showed that the preponderance of students sent to the discipline room on any given day were African American boys and that these students often remained in the discipline room for several class periods. His data also showed that 68 percent of all students referred between September 1997 and April 1998 were sent with incomplete referral forms. This made it impossible to examine any official records to determine why the boys were sent and how long they remained there.

This parent presented his data to the local school council to suggest the need for a referral process that would accurately detail the reason and time students were spending in the discipline room. He believed that students who are out of class often were not learning and argued that the preponderance of African American boys referred to the accommodation room meant that they did not have an equal opportunity to learn. His research provided the school council with a basis for recommending improved referral procedures for the discipline room. In addition, his data led to substantive discussions about related issues, such as how to motivate a student while in the accommodation room and what to do about frequently referred students.

The Rosemont principal provided the local school council periodic updates on

work undertaken to address problems identified by the council. Local school councils, across the District, were not generally considered very effective. But the Rosemont school council developed an alternate referral process, was the impetus for ongoing professional development in diversity for the school staff, and made visible the connection between teaching and learning issues and the accommodation room.

DISCUSSION

These three examples show how the TAPAS community created a place where an unusual and sustained dialogue could occur among key stakeholders in the reform agenda. Their inquiries made a difference — on a small scale — in the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms and small learning communities or in pointing out how school policies (or lack thereof) influenced some students' learning opportunities. In each example, the learning that took place in the TAPAS group affected the participants' work in their individual schools that, in turn, had implications for others in the TAPAS community.

The **TAPAS study at Herron Elementary School** sparked discussion across the six TAPAS schools about the nature of homework assignments for young children, teachers' interpretations of standards, and parents' role in assisting children with their homework and in tracking the implementation of standards. Because the study was conducted by a TAPAS parent with another parent, the reasons for the other parent's reluctance to discuss her son's difficulties with the teacher were not construed as parental negligence. The TAPAS parent was a more receptive audience and offered an alternative perspective on instructional policies in contrast to what the other parent might have expected from the school. Discussions in the TAPAS group had given the TAPAS parent a deeper and broader understanding of what teachers were trying to do. The exchange about cultural differences gave the two parents conducting the inquiry and the rest of the TAPAS community the opportunity to rethink assumptions about what constitutes an appropriate learning environment at home and how unexamined assumptions can undermine productive dialogue among differently-situated parents, teachers, and students.

The **TAPAS participants at DuBois High School** focused on what it means to enact high expectations for all students in their small learning community. The school's TAPAS team was involved in three concurrent efforts: keeping parents informed in thorough and deliberate ways and eliciting their views, developing curriculum that challenged students (via high standards) and supported their school-college/career aspirations, and advocating for individual students by tracking test score data and college applications and acceptances.

Struggles over power and feelings of disrespect — so common in the literature about parent-teacher interaction in public schools — were notably absent in the DuBois small learning community. Norms for collegiality evolved over the course of

the investigation/intervention. Infusing inquiry processes into the small learning community culture provided a structure for teachers, parents, and students to work together on a project focused on the quality of teaching and learning. The inquiry process also gave teachers insight into their own assumptions about parents' concerns and a forum for openly questioning these assumptions. To foster inclusion in their small learning community and to support student achievement, the TAPAS teachers, parents, and students made their collaboration public by co-signing communications. By collaborating effectively inside the small learning community, the DuBois TAPAS team members were able to access additional school and community-based resources.

The **TAPAS parent from Rosemont Elementary School** raised complex questions about schooling and diversity that occupied the TAPAS community for the life of the project. His membership on the local school council gave him access to quantitative data with which to shape and pursue his inquiry. His inquiry was not just an individual project, but became a central activity of the council itself. Using cross-school data, this parent raised questions that linked issues of race and gender to questions about discipline practices and school policies that, in turn, connected to issues related to children's access to standards-driven instruction. This parent helped extend the boundaries of parent involvement via the local school council to include discipline policies that directly affected children's learning. For some time the local school council had been a legitimate forum for parents to participate in policies affecting discipline. In this instance, however, the Rosemont School Council moved to address underlying issues involved in perceptions and use of the accommodation room. This placed the local school council in a very different relationship to the daily life of the school; it underlined the role parents can play in connecting discipline policies and practices to teaching and learning.

The experience of the Rosemont School Council also suggests new ways that a school principal can support parental involvement. The Rosemont principal was willing to work with council members in examining accommodation room policies and referral practices. He also arranged professional development for the whole staff to address school climate issues of race and gender that emerged in the inquiry process.

The **work of TAPAS overall** is a telling case of participatory inquiry as a means of meaningful parent involvement. Three dimensions seem most important.

First, the inquiry community functioned as an intermediary structure that created a context for parent education and involvement in school reform efforts. The TAPAS community emanated from a university-based teacher network experienced in fostering cross-grade and cross-school, grass roots inquiry as a means of generating local knowledge for school improvement. The design of the inquiry community reflected the belief that

teachers, parents, and students should have a significant role in shaping the work that goes on in classrooms, schools, and communities.

As in other inquiry communities sponsored by the Philadelphia Writing Project, the fundamental work of the TAPAS community derived from cross-talk and school data collection by parents, teachers, and students. The members of the TAPAS community acted as participant-observers and observant-participants in a range of school practices. Cross-talk — conversations across schools, age and grade levels, race and ethnicity, roles, and gender — led to possibly changing the relationships that are critical to changing learning environments for students. The TAPAS process provided parents with knowledge about the *Children Achieving* agenda, and addressed some communication gaps between school and home. Through the TAPAS inquiry community, parents had the opportunity to learn how the new policies were understood, interpreted, shaped, and adapted, and to present their viewpoints.

Through their cross-site TAPAS inquiries and interactions, parents, teachers, and students learned about some visible and invisible barriers to parent participation in schools. They learned about generalizations parents make about teachers, and about generalizations teachers make about parents (for example, that they do not care). This kind of inquiry invites multiple interpretations of experience and data. Issues of ethics and ways of knowing become entangled: each decision about what counts as knowledge becomes an ethical choice about engaging with and valuing the perspectives of others.

Because of their sustained conversation and evolving social relationships, TAPAS parents and teachers (as well as students) had a safer space to question their assumptions and actions, to rethink their positions, and to influence the ideas of others. Parents often positioned marginally to the school community were invited to join as full and equal partners, valued and supported for their willingness to raise difficult questions.

A second important dimension of the TAPAS case study derived from the group's consistent focus on issues of equity. Given the District's push for equity by means of standards, professional development, and participatory governance, the inequities that emerged in the data collected by the TAPAS group were disturbing to the participants. Each school's TAPAS team (or individuals on the TAPAS school team) selected specific questions with significance for them and their school. In the large TAPAS group sessions, participants used standards-based reform as the primary rubric for analyzing and interpreting all data collected during all stages of the inquiry process. This commitment legitimized hard talk and unified seemingly disparate inquiries into aspects of instruction, curriculum, assessment, culture, race, gender, and school and District policies under a shared vision of changes in the school landscape.

As indicated in the three TAPAS inquiry examples, parents were central to the success of the group as an inquiry community. From the inception of TAPAS, parents who joined the group did not separate inquiry from action. This third dimension — the strong relationship between inquiry and participatory reform — made the role of parents especially powerful. The TAPAS parents were willing to press the boundaries of participatory reform. Participating parents assumed that it was their right and responsibility to become more informed about what was going on in their schools and to become more skillful contributors in achieving positive change.

The TAPAS school-based inquiry projects demonstrated that change is difficult and may be unwelcome and openly resisted. Still, parents regarded their role in stirring the pot as increasingly important to the larger project of reform. They used the documentation processes for multiple purposes: to raise questions and uncertainties, to stimulate wider participation by other parents, to enter into new relationships with teachers and administrators, and to commit themselves beyond the welfare of their own children to a sense of responsibility for the collective good. The claim here is not that these transformations were wrought by membership in the inquiry community, but that the TAPAS community offered a forum where these kinds of insights and actions could take place. The TAPAS case study, however, does signal the benefits of developing parent-teacher relationships focused on common issues over time; it is a model that is replicable in structure but flexible for local focus. With some money and determined leadership, such inquiry groups could become a standing invitation for parent involvement in schools. Teacher networks (such as the Philadelphia Writing Project) are a resource for schools seeking to establish stronger parent-teacher collaborations. Such intermediary organizations that have a history of engaging parents and teachers in ongoing investigations and respectful conversations about student learning and school reform are well positioned to support sustained collaboration between the District and parents.

Sustainability is a question at the heart of reform efforts. We suggest that inquiry communities can provide structure and flexibility where parents and teachers may work together as equal partners over time to foster effective teaching and learning practices. All parents will probably not participate in such communities. But inquiry communities can provide a different and intellectually compelling venue for parent involvement, and their work has the potential to influence both short- and long-term school plans, as well as student achievement.

Both the Alliance Organizing Project and the Teachers and Parents and Students case studies highlight possible new parent roles in school reform and new ways for parents, teachers, and principals to collaborate in school reform. The specifics in the two case studies illustrate the particular contribution of parents — their insights, persistence, sensitivities, and questions that are missing when parent leadership

is absent from reform. In the next and final section of this report, we reflect on what these cases say about achieving authentic parent participation in school reform.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS: PARENT-PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION AS SCHOOL REFORM

Children Achieving was a systemic reform plan for reshaping the entire School District. It offered a vision of reform, rather than a set of standardized practices, that parents, community members, teachers, and school administrators struggled to implement in their schools and in their relationships with each other. The *Children Achieving* reform strategy held multiple meanings and purposes for parent involvement. Some aspects of *Children Achieving* reinforced the notion that parents are consumers of education or are the schools' clients, that parent involvement is about improving how parents are involved on behalf of their individual children, or that schools should be responsive to the social service needs of individual children and families.

While embracing these notions, *Children Achieving* also incorporated another idea, the belief that empowered parents can be education leaders and collaborators with education professionals in changing how schools affect the experience of all children. This conceptualization of parents and local community as a corresponding "site of power" to school professionals[68] acknowledges the unique perspective of differently-positioned school stakeholders and challenges the usual balance of power that marginalizes parents, often casting them as deficient or outsiders. Furthermore, the two case studies in this report show that when the concerns and questions of low-income urban parents become central aspects of school reform, questions of societal inequities are often pushed to the surface.

Despite the *Children Achieving* vision of parents and community members as education leaders, there was little thought about the kind of time, effort, and resources it would take to change longstanding relations that have excluded parents from decision-making roles in schools. As noted in the introduction to this report, the *Children Achieving* structures intended to bring parents into these new roles were weak. The District compromised the domain over which local school councils would have authority and the balance of power between parents and professionals, thus undercutting local school councils as authentic loci for local decision-making. The District did not provide the professional development school principals and teachers needed to work collaboratively with parents and community members, including how to work through the inevitable tensions and conflict of changing roles and expectations.

Given this reality, it was predictable that local school councils would not be

[68] S. Rollow and A. Bryk, "The Chicago experiment: The potential and reality of reform." *Equity and Choice* 9 (1993), pp. 22-32.

fully implemented and that most small learning communities would not become sites for parent-professional collaboration. Although Philadelphia's *Children Achieving* Challenge dedicated financial resources to increasing parental participation in school reform, there was a lack of understanding at the top of what it would take at all levels of the system to turn rhetoric into reality and change parent-professional relations. Most schools were not ready to welcome parents in new roles.

Nonetheless, the next round of reform in Philadelphia will not start at the same point as *Children Achieving* did. As described in the first part of this report, a major accomplishment of *Children Achieving* was to change the perception of the rights of parents and the public-at-large to information about the schools. The District has opened data for examination that was not available previously. It will be a challenge for the next generation of reformers to use the data thoughtfully to build collaborative and reflective relations that can plan and implement change.

Another *Children Achieving* accomplishment has been an increase in services to children and families. There is beginning to be greater coordination among District, city, and other service providers in a number of Philadelphia neighborhoods. School-based counselors, nurses, and social workers are often at the hub of coordinating providers. In addition, the facilities of some schools have been opened to community groups after school hours, turning the buildings into a community resource for learning and recreation for adults and young people. The next wave of reformers will face the challenge of turning these interactions into relationships that go beyond the school just servicing clients.

Finally, although there was no large-scale shift in parent-professional relations, there is a change in the expectation about how the District should respond to parents. Former Superintendent Hornbeck set the example by launching the *Children Achieving* initiative with community meetings in all 22 clusters where he solicited feedback from parents and the public. He followed these meetings by accepting invitations to house meetings and area churches. More District employees at the cluster and central office levels feel, although variably, accountable for responding to parent grievances. Future reformers should take these relationships to another level, moving from quieting consumer complaints to building relations for school change.

The two case studies presented in this report highlight lessons for the next iteration of reform. They are cases of parent involvement where the vision of parents and community as education leaders and collaborators began to play out. These case studies illustrate two approaches to engaging parents in the leadership of school reform. The Alliance Organizing Project adapted community-organizing strategies in its work with parents. The AOP approach brought parents together to identify issues they believed were important to their children's education. The organizing process triggered the

development of networks among parents for the purpose of acting collectively on behalf of children to ensure their educational opportunities and outcomes. The Watkins Elementary School experience illustrates an incipient collaboration between parents and educators with a new vision of school leadership, which took into account the intellectual as well as social and economic imperatives of the everyday lives of urban children.

The six-school Teachers and Parents and Students community drew on the experience of the Philadelphia Writing Project to use inquiry to catalyze reflection and action, bringing parents and teachers together to investigate and support reform at their schools. The joint investigations and talk across the TAPAS group created a generative space in which parents and teachers could share and exchange views. The parents often brought perspectives that teachers would not normally see or new interpretations of what was happening. These perspectives frequently were part of the parents' experiences as members of urban minority groups. The three examples of TAPAS inquiry at the school level illustrate how sharing viewpoints — prior experiences, beliefs, interests, and cultural frameworks — can cultivate fertile ground for developing plans to improve students' learning environments.

Although conceptualized within a systemic reform plan, AOP and TAPAS were limited in scale. AOP received financial support from the *Children Achieving* Challenge, but commitment from District leadership — at all levels — to transforming the role of parents was absent. The gutting of the local school councils, the logical school structure where organized parents might voice their concerns, made the parents' job even more difficult. The places where the organizing was able to take root were more idiosyncratic than systemic, relying on the mix of players and their proclivities for risking new kinds of relations. In addition, AOP, like similar efforts elsewhere, was new to organizing in the field of education and had much to learn about schools and school systems and how to position itself and its members to work successfully in a large urban system. Nonetheless, the early results of community organizing for school reform in Philadelphia and in other places nationally show promise.[69]

Although never intended to be an ongoing group, TAPAS offered a model of a cross-role, cross-school community that provided a space where parents, teachers, and students can construct useful knowledge about a standards-based reform. Continuing the kind of reflection and action TAPAS engendered would depend on the habits parents, teachers, and students

[69] S. Blanc and J. Brown, *Bringing community into schools: The case of Logan Square Neighborhood Association.* Paper presented at the meeting of the American Anthropological Association, San Francisco, CA, 2000. E. Gold and D. Brown, *A report to the Alliance Organizing Project on its work with parents.* Philadelphia: Research for Action, 1998. E. Gold, E. Simon, and C. Brown, *Looking for indicators of the impact of community organizing for school reform.* Paper presented at the meeting of the American Anthropological Association, San Francisco, CA, 2000. D. Shirley, *Community organizing for urban school reform.* Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1997. E. Zachary and S. Latoye, *Community organizing for school improvement in the South Bronx.* New York: Institute for Education and Social Policy, New York University, 2001.

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have learned as well as on future opportunities to connect with local school councils, small learning communities, or other potential inquiry communities. Teacher networks such as the Philadelphia Writing Project have shown that communities of inquiry can have significant effects on school change.[70]

We argue in this report that reform without parents is reform unlikely to alter the educational experiences of urban children. The two case studies tell us what it takes to create authentic parent participation in school reform and what the value of the parents' participation can be. We selected "information-rich"[71] examples of AOP and TAPAS work with parents which reveal the conditions for and contribution of parents, matters not often addressed when reform is directed by, at, and for professional educators. The two case studies highlight the ways that parents augmented school change efforts by expanding notions of what reform was about and what it would take to alter children's education experience. The case studies show parents using their knowledge of children as learners at home and in the community as well as in classrooms to push examination of equity and standards issues both inside and outside the classroom. The cases also show parents working with teachers and principals to re-examine school-level policies and identify ways schools can strengthen the commitment of systemic reform to help all children achieve. The parents in both case studies challenged cultural assumptions about the attitudes, beliefs, and abilities of low-income urban parents to support school achievement.

This study of the role of parents has generated some useful lessons for future parent involvement in reform efforts. These include:

1. **Intermediary groups and settings can be effective vehicles for facilitating and maintaining parents' active participation in and leadership of school reform.**

- As intermediary organizations, AOP and TAPAS created safe and stable spaces where parents could identify their concerns, raise controversial issues, work through conflicts, and address issues that influence the school experience of urban youngsters over time. Both organizations were committed to engaging urban parents as actors in school reform, and to counteracting traditional power relations within schools; as a result, parents believed that their points of view were heard and respected. The work of AOP and TAPAS were critical counterweights to the District's irresolute and hazy commitment to the transformation of parent roles and to informing school reform with parents' perspectives, insights, and

[70] M. Fine (Ed.), *Chartering urban school reform: Reflections on public high schools in the midst of change*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1994. D. Goswami and P. Stillman (Eds.), *Reclaiming the classroom: Teacher research as an agency for change*. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1987. E. Useem, J. Culbertson, and J. Buchanan. *The contributions of teacher networks to Philadelphia's school reform*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Education Fund, 1997.

[71] M.Q. Patton, *Qualitative evaluation methods* (2nd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1990.

urban experience. AOP and TAPAS also provided a reprieve from sometimes unwelcoming schools, a place where parents and teachers could explore and regroup. Through participation in these groups, parents were able to bring depth and intensity to change efforts in local schools.

- Both AOP and TAPAS, because of their organizational connections to schools and school reform, provided a structure through which parents could negotiate their inside-outside relationship with local schools and the District. The case studies describe instances in which AOP and TAPAS leveraged flexible and more porous boundaries between schools and parents and reduced the distance between parents and their children's school experience. Nonetheless, the work of AOP and TAPAS was not driven by the imperatives of schools, but by the questions and concerns of parents. This was important in helping parents to maintain the integrity of their issues and to sustain their leadership in reform.

2. **Participation in AOP and TAPAS was learning and learning was the basis for parent action.**

- Organizing and inquiry, although distinct, have elements that help parents to focus and sustain their activity. AOP and TAPAS engaged parents in systematic processes of exploring concerns, collecting data, reflecting, then acting on what they learned. Both organizations involved parents in documenting their efforts, creating agendas, taking minutes, and engaging in public dialogue about issues they thought were important. These processes provide the foundation for parents becoming education leaders in their local schools and the District; they are the necessary skills of civic participation.

3. **Dialogue across schools and diverse groups of people creates a rich context for exploration of issues.**

- AOP and TAPAS both offered parents opportunities to explore issues across school sites. AOP and TAPAS groups worked with parents over time, a critical aspect of creating an environment for cross-school talk. AOP parents participated in citywide meetings and actions; TAPAS parents (and their teacher partners) from the six schools met regularly as a group. In both cases, cross-school dialogue enabled participants to see their individual schools in the context of others, to reassess possibilities at their local schools, and to share ideas for change strategies.

- Dialogue across the different roles of teachers, parents, and students was another significant way in which parents were able to gather and benefit from diverse viewpoints. Cross-role talk was inherent in the TAPAS model. Cross-role talk happened in the case of AOP more as a result of the relationships developed in organizing among parents, the principal, and teachers. In both cases, cross-role talk was a means of building new kinds of relationships and understandings

between differently-positioned school stakeholders. Cross-role talk permitted varied interest groups to identify a common cause where they could interact productively related to children's school experience. These new relationships are the basis for change in school culture.

4. **The posture of the school principal toward including parents as education leaders is important to opening space for parent leadership at the local school level.**

- Participatory reform, as envisioned by *Children Achieving*, demands administrative leadership that creates space for the participation of parents and teachers, and needs parents and teachers willing to enter that space and push its boundaries.[72] The AOP and TAPAS case studies illustrate how the role of parents can turn on the willingness of the principal (and teachers) to collaborate with parents in reform. It was key in the AOP experience at Watkins Elementary School and with TAPAS at Rosemont Elementary School. The principals of these schools embraced the work of parents; they did not act as gatekeepers deflecting parents from the school or separating the concerns of parents from those of teachers. The Watkins principal stepped aside to allow the organizing initiative space to develop momentum and focus. The AOP organizing process opened that space further — parent activity pulled in teachers. The teachers, in turn, began to organize themselves as a reciprocal group; they reached out, individually and collectively, in new ways to parents. At Rosemont, the principal played a key role in giving the parent on the local school council access to data about the accommodation room. The principal also used the parents' findings to document the need for professional development.

5. **Parents can participate and be important leaders at many different levels in a school or district.**

- School reformers often only view parents as leaders in school governance. School governance is an important venue for parent leadership, but it is not the only place where decisions affecting children's education are made, nor the only place where parents can offer leadership. The AOP and TAPAS case studies illustrate there are multiple entry points — the classroom, after-school programs, small learning communities, locals school councils, among others — where parents can participate and assume leadership roles. We would argue that parent leadership should be integrated throughout the many layers of schools and school districts.

6. **Stable, sustainable organizations and financial support are necessary to build parent leadership.**

- There are no quick fixes to building parent leadership. Developing parent leadership depends on

[72] G.L. Anderson, "Toward authentic participation: Deconstructing the discourses of participatory reforms in education." *American Educational Research Journal* 35 (1998), pp. 571-603.

designated funding and organizations that continue outreach and education beyond the turnover of a single generation of concerned parents.

While initiatives described in this report are pertinent to efforts involving parents as reform partners within many contexts, they are the unique product of an attempt to develop parents as education leaders within a standards-based reform. The architects of *Children Achieving* struggled to reach a balance between decisions made at the local school level and the mandates and best practices directed from the central office. The implementation of these mandates and best practices, however, was strong or weak depending on engagement at the local school level. Their success or failure relied on local commitment.

The two case studies illustrate how parent leadership can augment the quality of reform implementation. Parent activity can mobilize political will and help create the school climate and morale to support practitioners, as AOP activity did at Watkins Elementary School. Parent perspectives and questions can help identify areas where implementation needs to be strengthened, as happened in the TAPAS parent examination of homework and in the TAPAS work to make a rigorous, college-level curriculum a reality. The case studies serve as reminders that when reform is intended to transform public education, the participation of parents and others at the local level should not be seen as an add-on or side show, but a central aspect of the overall reform. The AOP and TAPAS cases studies reveal many challenges and tensions that accompany such efforts. They also reveal why the effort is worth making.

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